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# ANGKOR

THE HISTORY OF THE  
ROYAL CITY OF ANGKOR  
IN THE KINGDOM OF CAMBODIA  
BY  
H. M. BAILEY

*By the same author*

CANADIAN NORTH  
THE BIRDS OF BREWERY CREEK  
BORNEO PEOPLE









# ANGKOR

by the

Rt. Hon. MALCOLM MacDONALD

with one hundred and twelve photographs by

LOKE WAN THO

and the author

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JONATHAN CAPE  
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*frontispiece: HER ROYAL HIGHNESS PRINCESS BUPPHA DHEVI]*



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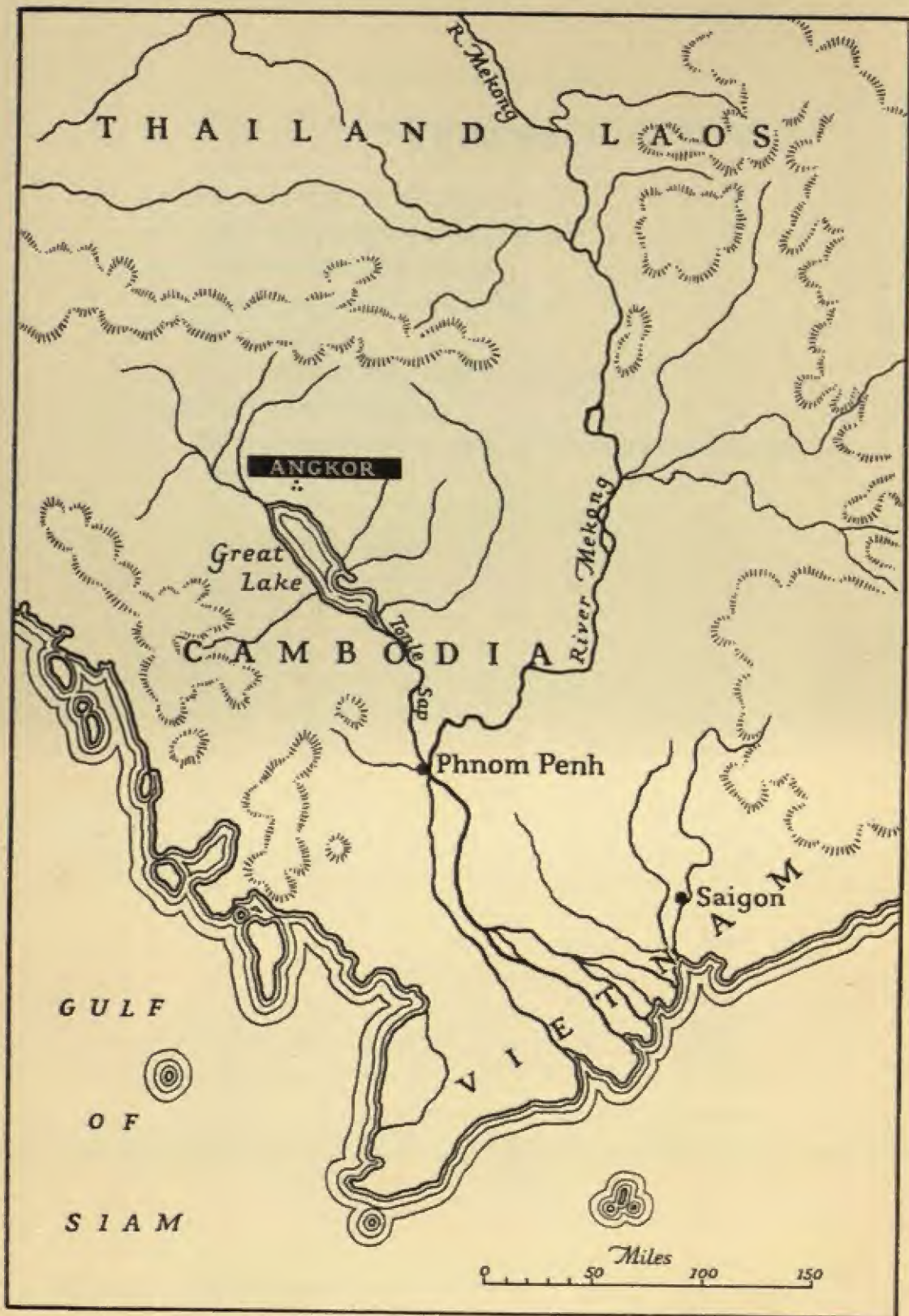


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## CHAPTER ONE

# The King of the Khmers

PHNOM PENH sprawls beside the Mekong River. In the little city's heart rises a small hill which gives the place one half of its name, for the Khmer word for hill is 'phnom', and a Buddhist temple on the summit provides the second half, since it was built there two centuries ago by a pious lady named Penh.

Phnom Penh is the capital of Cambodia. I visited it first in 1948, to pay my respects to His Majesty King Sihanouk and to confer with him on Indo-Chinese affairs. His country was still a French Protectorate, and when I landed at the airfield the symbols of this semi-colonial state greeted me. A reception party of French and Cambodian dignitaries clad in dazzling tropical uniforms conducted me to a guard of honour, where French, North African and Foreign Legion soldiers stood smartly at attention beside their Cambodian brothers-in-arms. The band treated me to a concert of national anthems—the British, the Cambodian and the French. It was sparkling music performed in sunshine by a glittering troop; and when their trumpets and drums, flutes and cymbals broke into a dance-tune as I inspected the guard, the atmosphere assumed a gay, musical-comedy air.

Escorted by outriders, a car whisked me from the airfield past several miles of paddy-fields and grass-hutted villages to Phnom Penh. The city was neatly planned, with broad avenues of flame-of-the-forest trees, elegant official residences standing in gardens scented by tropical blooms, narrower

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streets bordered by crowded rows of native dwellings where banana trees sprouted untidily in backyards, and a commercial centre where imposing European shops rose from pavements cluttered with open-air Oriental stalls — all gathered round the little hill with its Buddhist temple among graceful coconut-palms.

As I drove through the streets I saw throngs of the capital's two hundred thousand inhabitants. Idle and inquisitive, they assembled along the footways to observe the stranger riding by in a government car. I noticed the mixture of faces, for three different breeds composed the population. The Cambodians, or Khmers, were men and women with brown wrinkled skins, tousled black hair and robust, stocky bodies. Amongst them were many Annamites and Cochin-Chinese — Vietnamese as they are now called — with smooth faces, sleek hair, pale skins and slim bodies. The former resembled figures roughly hewn in wood, whilst the latter were like images made of polished ivory. The Khmers provided an element of Indian stock and the Vietnamese a strain of Chinese in the mixture of peoples inhabiting the lands aptly called Indo-China. In addition I saw that day many actual Chinese, parts of the immigrant flood which for generations has overflowed the frontiers of China and spread as coolies, vegetable gardeners, laundrymen, small traders and rich towkays into all the countries of South-East Asia.

I drove to the French Haut Commissariat, where I was to stay with Monsieur Raymond, the representative of the Imperial power. Tall, good-looking and courteous, but formal, he was an able representative of the old school of French colonial administrators. Yet he also felt an understanding of upsurging Nationalist Asia which gave him sympathy with the Khmers' aspirations for independence. He seemed a man torn between two inclinations — conserva-



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tive and liberal — and was doing his best to find a judicious series of compromises which would lead gradually from the old regime of colonial dependence to the new one of national freedom.

### II

Later that morning I went to call on His Majesty the King. His palace stood in serene gardens on the bank of the river. A high wall surrounded the precincts, and within it many regal buildings stood amidst lawns. Each had its own particular function in the traditional scheme of things. There were the Silver Pagoda, the Private Palace, the Throne Hall, the Royal Treasury, the Pavilion of Dancers, the Chamber of Musicians, the Stable of the White Elephant and other romantic places. Amongst them only the sacred Silver Pagoda was old. The other principal buildings were modern, though designed in ancient style. Some were tall and stately, others squat and long, but all had broad flights of steps climbing to gilded doorways, painted walls with carved red-and-gold shutters flanking bizarre windows, slim colonnades supporting soaring eaves and gables, and many-tiered roofs of coloured tiles rising to elegant, glittering spires. Imagination could not conceive more enchanting Oriental architecture.

My car stopped before the Throne Hall, and I climbed a sweep of steps to its porticoed entrance. On the top step a young man waited to conduct me to the royal audience. He was clad in stiff half-European, half-Khmer court dress, but in spite of that official attire adopted a charmingly informal manner. He looked no older than a schoolboy, with black curly hair and a handsome, chubby face. His large, dark eyes had a frank expression, and a smile played upon his sensitive



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mouth. I bowed over the hand which he extended to me — for this was none other than King Sihanouk himself.

He spoke words of cordial welcome in precise, carefully practised English, laughed with a mixture of naturalness and shyness, and turned to lead me into the hall. As we walked along a rich carpet towards two gilded armchairs in the middle of the chamber, a company of Ministers and other courtiers made deep obeisance. His Majesty sat in one chair and motioned to me to occupy the other. The notables subsided on rows of small seats arranged before us, where they remained in prim silence staring at us throughout the interview. The scene was like an eighteenth-century print of an Eastern potentate receiving a foreign envoy.

The dignity of the occasion was enhanced by the stately dimensions and grand furnishings of the Throne Hall. Sunshine slanted through tall windows and lit its polished floor, frescoed walls and painted ceiling. At our backs rose the lofty golden throne used by Cambodian monarchs at their coronations, and close by were similarly regal articles for their use on other ceremonial occasions: the nine-tiered umbrella-of-state, a gilded, silk-cushioned couch on which they reclined at palace functions, the palanquin for royal progresses through the streets, a huge vase to hold the corpse of a dead king before his cremation, the catafalque on which his body is borne to its funeral pyre, and other splendid, awe-inspiring objects.

Amidst these formal surroundings, and before many formal courtiers, only the King was informal. His charm and friendliness were unaffected. For half an hour he held me in lively conversation, asking many questions, listening eagerly to my answers, mentioning some of his principal preoccupations, referring to his desire for Cambodia's national independence, and expressing pleasure at the prospect of further exchanges

## THE KING OF THE KHMERS

of views during my visit. This was a mere introduction, he remarked, so that we could get to know each other. He touched lightly on some less serious topics, and was a mixture of earnestness and gaiety. Sometimes he looked worried, and at other times laughed boisterously.

Before the audience ended he told me that he had a special request to make of me. He was a keen and indeed accomplished horseman. Riding was one of his passions. He had a private arena in the palace grounds where in a few weeks' time he would hold horse-jumping competitions. He told me that the best officers in his army would compete, that some French cavalymen would also take part, that perhaps visitors from neighbouring Thailand would join in the contests, and that he himself would perform. It would be great fun. Could I arrange for some British military officers to come from Singapore to Phnom Penh to compete? They need not bring horses; he would provide good mounts if I would produce good riders. It would be a fine encouragement to him, his army and his people.

I promised to do my best to ensure British participation in his *Concours Royal de Cheval*, and we parted as excellent friends.

It was the summer of 1948. King Sihanouk had been on the throne for seven years, and was aged twenty-five. He traced his ancestry back to the kings of the fabulous Khmer Empire of a thousand years ago. Many of its monuments still stood, a hundred and fifty miles away in the jungle at Angkor — some of the most astonishingly beautiful ruins on earth.

After the interview I wandered through the palace grounds, inspecting the buildings spaced amongst pleasant lawns with flower-beds and blossoming shrubs. There was an atmosphere of leisurely, almost uneventful tranquillity about the place, though preparations were being made for various small events. Soldiers of the King's Bodyguard lolled beneath



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shady trees, waiting to receive a foreign dignitary due for an audience with His Majesty some hours later; gardeners meandered along paths carrying potted plants for a ceremony to be held on the morrow; and court functionaries drifted to and fro on self-important but evidently not very urgent errands. From one pavilion issued the sweet, tinkling music of a native orchestra of xylophones and gongs. I went to see what was afoot there, and found a company of dancers rehearsing a ballet for that evening. The ballerinas were pretty girls, seeming little older than children, and their teachers were hag-like crones who thirty years earlier had themselves been gracious dancers.

Afterwards I went to the Stable of the White Elephant. A pair of the rare creatures were amongst King Sihanouk's most prized possessions, and I wished to pay my respects to them. At their lodgings, however, a stable-boy informed me that they had gone to the river for a bath. I followed them there, and after much searching in reedy swampland came on them wallowing luxuriously in a private pool. One was a full-grown monster whilst the other was younger and smaller. Both were pinky-grey, with pale eyes and other albino features. It was a high honour to catch a glimpse of such royal giants, and they glanced at me with the disdainful indifference of Emperors.

I watched their lordly gait as they ambled home, their small eyes half-closed in boredom, their great ears twitching to ward off assaults by impertinent flies, and their long trunks ponderously swinging. They plodded along a path where groups of laughing, talkative natives sat outside their huts, some mending fish-traps, others gambling with dice, and others just gossiping. As the elephants passed, the men and women ceased their chatter, rose silently and stood like obedient subjects paying homage to processing Majesty.



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I wandered into the city's streets, observing the people. They seemed humble, peaceable folk, content to tackle each day's little problems as they arose, and lacking any higher ambition. Mostly they were nearer poverty than wealth, but what they missed in material affluence was compensated by their natural possessions of abundant sunshine and fruitful earth. Their fields produced plenty of rice and their huge river yielded multitudes of fish. So existence was easy, pleasant and relaxed. For these blessings they gave thanks to the supernatural beings who decide the fates of men. Like most simple, rustic people in the East, in their hearts they were still attached to animist beliefs; but their official faith was Buddhism, and religion was the strongest impulse in their lives. Amongst them priests had great power. Often groups of these holy men strolled along the streets holding parasols to shade their shaven heads and golden-brown bodies, swathed in yellow robes thrown across their shoulders like Roman togas.

### III

That evening I dined with the King. It was a small, intimate party in the Private Palace followed by a performance by the Royal Corps de Ballet. As I drove again through the tall gateway into the stately gardens I could hardly believe that I was awake, for the experience seemed more dreamlike than real.

The Private Palace was small as royal residences go, rather like a 'Petit Trianon'. Externally and internally its architecture was pleasant, and its rooms contained a choice collection of furniture and objets d'art which gave it an air of remarkable distinction. The place might have been a miniature museum representing various cultures arranged by the

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hand of a discriminating connoisseur. Distributed through the apartments were fine examples of Cambodian silver, Siamese porcelain, Vietnamese lacquer, Japanese painting, Chinese rugs, French furniture and other gracious things. Most beautiful of all were some noble examples of classical Khmer sculpture — figures of scantily clad *apsaras*<sup>1</sup> posturing for a dance, and heads of divinities with serene faces lit by the famous, mysterious Khmer smile. Their exquisite forms gave me my first physical impression of the brilliance of Cambodia's ancient civilization, and stimulated my excitement at the prospect of visiting its historic centre at Angkor.

His Majesty was an affable host, greeting his guests with dignified informality. This he achieved in spite of the fact that his own subjects, however exalted they might be, bent double and almost crawled in homage to him when they entered his presence, a gesture unbelievably servile to Western eyes. But adulation did not affect his natural, unspoilt manner.

After sipping sherry and conversing for a while we repaired to the dining-room. Its decor had the slightly decadent, over-ornate style of Parisian salons at the beginning of the century; but a scintillating screen of red, black and gold Tongkinese lacquer dramatically filling one wall reminded us that we were on the banks of the Mekong, not the Seine. A table was laid for thirty people and loaded with crystal, silver and flowers. His Majesty's chef was as cunning a culinary artist as France could produce, and that evening beguiled us with excellent samples of:

*Potage Bisque d'Écrevisses*  
*Barquettes de Caviar*  
*Pointes d'Asperges au Gratin*

<sup>1</sup> Heavenly dancers.



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*Dindonneau farci au Foie Gras*

*Salade de Dalat*

*Caprice d'Arlette*

*Coupe Khemarin*

Through the meal we drank a succession of French wines of most honourable vintage.

As the banquet proceeded a military band in the garden entertained us with light music. Their tunes floated through the open windows, conveying a nostalgic sense of a vanished period, an age just past. With a mixture of sweet wistfulness and lively gusto an assortment of wind instruments punctuated by booming drums and clashing cymbals played old-fashioned minuets and waltzes, marches and serenades which transported me back to my childhood, when on summer evenings in Edwardian London I lay abed in my nursery listening to open-air concerts by a regimental band in the pavilion of Lincoln's Inn Fields. The smell of lime trees and a distant rumble of traffic along Kingsway — of horse-drawn buses, swaying hansom cabs and the first daring motor cars — were somehow conveyed to me, although I sat at a dinner table in distant Indo-China. It was reminiscent of that tranquil period which preceded the fateful year 1914, the calm before the storms which have since broken over the world.

King Sihanouk's conversation was ceaselessly interesting. He was relaxed and cheerful, surrounded by a select group of princes and courtiers and their ladies, men of eminent distinction and women of delicious beauty — and most of them, incidentally, old enough to be his parents. Nevertheless he outshone the others in the company. Sometimes he monopolized the conversation, attracting the attention of all by some theory which he propounded or some tale which



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he told. He spoke of contemporary events in Cambodia, of people and problems and prospects. Laughingly he talked of the tribulations of kingship. His rustic subjects, it seemed, expected him to perform miracles. Recently he had toured a remote province where the weather was foul, bandits were loose, wild beasts ate the crops, and other misfortunes afflicted the peasantry. When His Majesty appeared amongst them they asked him to put a check on all these disasters.

'I can't control those things,' he said.

'But you're the King,' they replied with disarming simplicity.

'Yes, but I have no power over unbridled elements, savage beasts and wild men,' he retorted.

They stared at him, dumbfounded, disappointed.

'I'm the King, but I'm also a mere man,' he explained.

To them that was incomprehensible. They did not regard him as wholly human. As his ancestors had been to their ancestors, so he was to them, a semi-divine being.

I got an impression of deep seriousness lying beneath light-heartedness in his character, of inexperience tempered by innate sagacity, and of modesty balanced with self-confidence. He was a fascinating study of a young man burdened with responsibilities far beyond his years, learning deliberately the duties of his august office, lacking expert knowledge and yet fortified by intuitive self-reliance. That last quality sprang from his magic attribute of majesty, his heritage of absolute authority handed down from a long line of kings who for centuries had been regarded by their subjects as infallible demi-gods. But these weighty official traits in his nature could not quench the irrepressible boyishness in him, his own personal gifts of intelligence, wit and sparkling youth.

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### IV

After dinner we lit cigars, drank liqueurs, strolled through the rooms inspecting His Majesty's favourite works of art, and then went into the garden to see the dancing.

The night was velvety black, and myriads of stars jewelled the heavens. Nearer the earth another mysterious illumination lit the darkness. It was a vivid brightness which seemed to float in mid-air about a hundred feet above our heads, and to concentrate in the region of the palace buildings. It gleamed on the roofs of the Throne Hall, the Royal Treasury, the Silver Pagoda and neighbouring edifices, leaving everything above and below in shadow whilst the details of the roofs were glaringly revealed. In this brilliant light their curious shapes were fantastically accentuated; their up-curling eaves, steep decorated gables, stag's-horn finials and successions of overlapping, receding tiers of rooflets climbing as if by steps to the supreme, soaring spires, all appeared suspended in air like fabulous galleons floating through the black spaces around. The illusion was so dramatic that at first one attributed it to some strange miracle, and only on further examination realized that it was due to a skilful manipulation of flood-lights inserted amongst crevices in the buildings. The scene had an unearthly, imaginary, fairyland quality.

The King invited me to walk with him across the lawn to the Pavilion of Dancers, and we took our place at the head of a procession. Before us strolled six torch-bearers holding tall candles with naked flames, beside us marched other servants carrying bamboo staves like wands of office, and behind came the company of princes, courtiers and ladies. Along either edge of our path soldiers of the King's Body-



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guard stood at the salute, their dusky faces dimly lit by the flickering torches as we passed. Beyond them I saw ghostly forms of flower-beds, and the black, looming shapes of buildings each capped by its fiery cluster of roofs. Those roofs were like a range of summits of snow-capped mountains reflecting the last rays of a gorgeous sunset after the earth below had sunk into dusk's oblivion.

One building ahead of us was even more brightly illuminated than the rest. It was the Pavilion of Dancers. A two-storeyed structure, its lower floor was shrouded in darkness, but the upper was lit by hundreds of candles in sparkling chandeliers. That was the theatre. The great room had no walls, being open to the elements, with only tall, widely spaced pillars supporting the customary series of roofs mounting steeply to a central spire. So the whole glittering chamber was exposed to our gaze, and no playhouse ever appeared more enticing.

As we approached it King Sihanouk told me of the dancers and their ballets. He was an authority on this ancient form of Khmer drama, and prepared me for some features which to a foreigner would be exotic and incomprehensible without words of explanation. Then we entered the building and climbed a staircase to the theatre.

The place was a mixture of spaciousness and intimacy. A stage filled its centre, sunk slightly below the level of the auditorium, like the arena in a circus. Round three sides of it rows of chairs were set for spectators, whilst the fourth side was open for the entry of actors. An audience of about two hundred persons already filled the seats—as many as the chamber could hold. They rose and bowed to the King as we entered. He and I sat in grand armchairs opposite the centre of the stage, and a hush of expectancy fell on the crowd as servants crawled on their knees to His Majesty



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offering him programmes for our instruction and drinks for our refreshment.

Parts of the long, oblong stage were already occupied by performers. At one end an orchestra crouched on the floor, its members fingering their pipes and oboes, gongs and drums, conches and other strange instruments in preparation for action; and at the other end squatted a choir who would sing certain passages of classical narrative as the dancers unravelled their tales in a series of scenes. Between the two groups was a large empty space of stage.

Suddenly the orchestra broke the silence with a flourish of music. Flutes and other wind instruments blew gently, ripples of melody rose from bamboo xylophones, and gongs and drums added some well-timed thuds to the noise. It was exciting music, full of novel tones and phrases to my unaccustomed ears. As soon as its first note sounded, a troupe of female dancers appeared at the farther end of the stage. Clothed in fabulous costumes, they came in two rows like successive waves advancing along a beach, half running and half shuffling across the floor until they came to a halt before His Majesty. They faced him like a corporal's guard of Amazons, fell on their knees, joined their hands before their faces in an attitude of reverence, and bowed to him so low that their heads almost touched the floor. Then they resumed a kneeling posture, unjoined their hands, rose to their feet again, and turned and departed as swiftly as they had come. As soon as the stage was empty the music ceased. The introduction was over.

As the girls paid their homage to the King, I studied their costumes. Each wore a magnificent head-dress somewhat like a medieval knight's helmet, but of much more delicate and fantastic design. Wrought in gold and inset with precious stones, these helms were chased and embossed with superlative

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craftsmanship. Each gripped closely the dancer's head and rose to finials of diverse patterns, some slim, tapering spikes, others contrived like miniature pagodas, and others leaping like flames. These gorgeous head-dresses gave dramatic beauty to the faces of the almond-eyed, high cheek-boned, pouting-lipped maidens who wore them.

Equally theatrical was the rest of their costumes. All wore close-fitting, long-sleeved bodices of variously coloured velvets adorned with patterns in gold thread, and their silk skirts were also richly embroidered with gold. The dancers who represented male characters had high-pointed epaulettes on both shoulders, whilst those who played females wore one shoulder and arm bare. The male impersonators also had their sarong-like lower garment tucked between their legs to form a native dress called a *sampot* (or trouser), whereas the women characters wore theirs loose like a skirt. Their feet were bare except for gold anklets, for an important feature of Cambodian dancing is the significant movements not only of the fingers but also of the toes.

Soon after the introductory episode the orchestra began another tune, starting lightly with a wail from a solitary flute, then growing gradually in volume as bolder instruments intervened in support of that first melancholy sigh, and finally waxing strong with a tinkling of xylophones and a rumble of drums. The clear, liquid tones of the bamboo xylophones and the soft cooing of pipes combined to make the melody, and to these were added a medley of other sounds. Some instruments droned, others shrieked and others made even more extraordinary ejaculations; and so with a mixture of grunts and squeaks, wails and biffs, whistles and clashes the music proceeded to express a variety of moods. Sometimes it was gentle and coaxing, at other times imperative and wild. Mostly it was unaccompanied by anything but the actions of



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the dancers, but occasionally a high-pitched chanting from the choir at the opposite end of the stage reinforced it. The singers' words recounted incidents in the drama being presented — all incomprehensible gibberish to me.

But the printed programme related the story. Let me tell it. The principal item in the corps de ballet's programme was a piece called *Preah Chinavong's Legend*.

The hero, Preah Chinavong, was a prince of charming disposition and scholarly attainment. He seemed to be the favourite pupil of his teacher, a renowned hermit, for when his studies were complete the ascetic gave him an unusually useful gift — a magic sword. Armed with this implement, the youth started on his homeward journey.

His way led through a forest, and was so long that eventually he grew tired. Lying on the ground, he fell asleep with his miraculous sword at his side. For some odd reason, however, the sword was not so trusty as one would suppose. Whilst the prince dreamed, a white monkey crept up and stole it. The weapon's magic was evidently not of a type to protect it from such an astonishing piece of impertinence. Indeed, throughout the narrative the blade behaved with a lack of initiative which must make a sceptical reader harbour a suspicion that its magical qualities had been exaggerated, and that it possessed in fact no virtues beyond those normally belonging to a piece of cold, inanimate, sharp steel. But His Highness did not think of that when he awoke and discovered his loss. He was too upset. In deep agitation he began to search for his missing property.

As it happened, at the same time another royal personage, Preah Bat Chetra, the King of the Yeaks, went for a stroll in the forest. There he saw a white monkey carrying a sword. Jumping to the conclusion that the animal was a receiver of stolen goods, His Majesty commanded it to give him the

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weapon. The monkey refused, whereupon the two engaged in combat. After a fierce duel the King triumphed, slew the monkey and helped himself to the sword.

Soon afterwards Prince Preah Chinavong, searching for his lost treasure, discovered the monkey's corpse bearing many frightful wounds. Filled with an insatiable curiosity to hear how the poor creature had suffered such mutilation, he decided to bring the body to life again. This was not difficult, since one of the subjects in which he had graduated with the hermit was the science of restoring the dead to life; and before long the revived monkey was chatting amicably with the prince. In a burst of gratitude highly commendable in an ape, he confessed to stealing the magic sword, and agreed to accompany His Highness to the Yeak country to recover it.

By one of those happy coincidences which make otherwise impossible situations perfectly possible, just as Preah Chinavong and his companion arrived in the neighbourhood of the Yeak king's castle the monarch's daughter, Princess Archean Pichet, was taking exercise with her maids of honour in the gardens. Noticing her, and suspecting that she felt a strong sentimental attachment to innocent young animals, Preah Chinavong promptly changed the white monkey — which up to that moment had been a lusty beast — into a pretty baby monkey. How he did this — especially in the absence of his magic sword — must remain a mystery, but no doubt his tutor had taught him that conjuring trick amongst other valuable lessons.

The little monkey went to the princess and gambolled playfully before her. She at once took a great liking to it — thus falling right into Preah Chinavong's trap — and ordered her maids to chase it. They ran hither and thither in fruitless attempts to seize the pet, and soon all but one of them got lost



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in the woodland beyond the garden. Only the chief maid of honour, an enchanting girl called Nearadey, kept her two steady, beautiful eyes on the quarry, who cunningly enticed her ever deeper into the forest to where Preah Chinavong awaited her. Needless to say, as soon as the prince and the lady-in-waiting observed each other they fell head over heels in love, and thereupon exchanged many amiable courtesies. Indeed, it would be no exaggeration to say that they engaged in a mild flirtation. In the course of it he told her of his cruel misfortune in losing a magic sword, and she expressed a heart-felt yet hopeless wish that it lay in her power to restore his lost property. He confided to her that this wish was by no means so hopeless as she thought, since the sword was now in the possession of none other than her mistress's father, the King of the Yeaks. Preah Chinavong begged her to discover it and give it secretly to the monkey, so that the little creature could bring the weapon back to him. All this Nearadey promised to do; and she and the monkey disappeared in the direction of the palace.

Princess Archean Pichet was delighted when she saw the innocent-looking animal, and at once resolved to show it to her father. The King, however, was a rather difficult, wilful character, as monarchs are apt to be; and at first he forbade his daughter to keep the monkey lest it should prove bad-tempered. At that the princess burst into tears, the King relented, and the monkey was received in audience.

Meanwhile Prince Preah Chinavong, alone in the forest, grew anxious about the success of Nearadey's mission. But he need not have worried; his troubles were nearly over. Suddenly he spied the white monkey skipping joyfully towards him through a glade, carrying the precious sword. The little monkey—for in truth he was a little monkey in every sense of the phrase—had grabbed it in the middle

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of the royal interview and escaped with it to its rightful owner.

This appealing romance the *corps de ballet* danced with fantastic and sweet magnificence. Sometimes the stage was occupied by only the principal actors, who conducted in dumbshow their encounters and dialogues, flirtations and quarrels, battles and reconciliations; and at other times the whole company of performers entered the scene, moving in graceful, regimental formation like a well-trained chorus in a Western revue. Always their splendid costumes gave dramatic dignity to their actions, and the stepping of the dancers was in conformity with this stately mood. There is nothing spontaneous, nothing free — still less abandoned — about Cambodian dancing. All the movements are restrained by custom, confined within bounds set with formal precision by centuries of tradition. Except in comic interludes, or at the crisis of a mock battle, the steps are slow and staid, and after almost every fresh action the dancers hesitate for a few moments, posing statuesquely with heads, arms, hands and feet held stiffly in certain well-rehearsed postures. Thus each performer proceeds with calculated deliberation from one fixed position to another, and the whole group of performers progresses from one composition to the next in a series of virtual tableaux. Often the most significant details in their mime are the contortions of their hands and fingers, which curve and flick, crook and bend with graceful suppleness. Their feet and toes also move in ways full of meaning to initiated spectators; but chiefly it is the perpetually changing gestures of hands and fingers which indicate the thoughts and intentions of the princes, princesses and other personages cavorting on the stage. They pass through a ceaseless succession of gesticulations, every one of which has a symbolism well known to the tutored Cambodian audience. The faces of the actors show



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almost no emotion. They are unimportant compared to their limbs, and remain as expressionless as placid masks.

Thus the performance proceeds with as much stiff precision as the drill of a platoon of soldiers on parade. Even actions which in real life are usually spontaneous, and indeed warmly exuberant, are portrayed with cold formality. A kiss, for example, is represented by a discreet grimace, and an embrace is indicated with a modest decorum which does not permit its participants even to touch hands.

When a clown enters the scene a different mood prevails. Suddenly restraint is thrown to the winds. The white monkey, for example, is in certain episodes such a character. This is one of the few parts played by a male dancer, who wears a close-fitting white tunic and tights, a long white tail and a mask with the face of a gibbon. No doubt all his movements are dictated by age-old tradition taught in the dancing-school with unerring faithfulness to a thousand precedents; but they are rendered in an apparently free, impromptu and boisterous spirit. He runs, leaps, prances, pirouettes and turns cartwheels as agilely as any Harlequin, and his antics are always instinct with humour. As he tilts his head impishly this way or that, wriggles his hips, flicks his tail and turns somersaults, the audience — which has hitherto been solemnly absorbed by the courtly struttings of other players — is frequently convulsed with laughter.

When a duel is fought between a hero and a villain the action again loses some of its normal reserve. The protagonists cease to move as if they were engaged in a sedate minuet, and do their duty with more gusto. Rushing at each other with a show of eagerness, they shake their fists, cross their swords and kick each other's shins with the ferocious mien of sham wrestlers. When the hero worsts his foe he permits himself to set one foot on the fallen corpse in a gesture

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of victory, like an exuberant big-game hunter planting his heel on a vanquished lion's mane.

Some other dancers besides the white monkey wear masks. Whenever a wild boar or ogre or other grotesque beast appears upon the scene its impersonator dons a false face representing the creature's head. These masks are beautifully made, their artistic quality is high, and they add an important feature to the Cambodian theatre.

The ballet of *Preah Chinavong's Legend* was followed that evening by two other pieces, one a romantic tale of love between Hanuman, the monkey god, and the Queen of the Fishes, taken from the great Indian epic, the *Ramayana*; and the other an enchanting Dance of Butterflies. Both were performed with grace. Then the entertainment ended with a repetition of its introductory episode. The orchestra suddenly struck up a lively snatch of music, the corps de ballet swept in a gliding movement across the stage until they stood before His Majesty, where they knelt at his feet in worship, and then turned and flitted away as quickly as they had come. The orchestra fell silent. The performance was over.

### v

As we strolled across the lawn beneath the stars back to the Private Palace King Sihanouk propounded to me a theory about the dancers' costumes. He told me that in the court of the ancient Khmer Empire dancers were lightly clad, like the half-naked *apsaras* whom I would see in the great sculptured friezes of the temple called Angkor Vat. Why, then, did they now clothe themselves so completely from head to foot? The King explained that when Angkor was captured by the Thais five centuries ago and the Khmer court left the capital hurriedly, the Royal Corps de Ballet were left behind by



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mistake. In the haste of flight from the enemy no one remembered them, and they stayed in their private quarters in the deserted palace. So they fell into the hands of the Thai conquerors, who subsequently took them with other splendid booty to their own capital at Ayuthia. There they became the royal dancers of the Thai monarchs, and introduced the Khmer tradition of dancing which has flourished brilliantly in Thailand ever since.

The Thais' idea of costume, however, was different from that of the Khmers. They were a people originating from the cold north in Yunnan, and were used to wearing a lot of clothes. Moreover, their court uniforms were gorgeous and, to their taste, infinitely superior to the flimsy simplicity of the Khmer corps de ballet. Such semi-nudity, they felt, was bucolic, if not savage. So at Ayuthia the palace tailors were set to work to clothe the foreign ballerinas in rich raiment of Thai style. When, many years later, the dancers returned to the new Khmer capital at Phnom Penh, and the tradition of dancing was revived in its palace, the dances themselves were the old ballets hallowed by centuries, but their performers' dresses remained an alien importation copied from the Thais.

The story gave a fascinating glimpse of the link between the past and the present, the unbroken history of the Khmer people, and the direct descent of modern Phnom Penh from ancient Angkor.

## CHAPTER TWO

# The History of the Khmers

### FUNAN

NEXT day I went to Angkor. At once I left the contemporary world and plunged a thousand years back into history. Many magnificent ruins are scattered through the Cambodian jungle about a hundred and fifty miles north-west of Phnom Penh. They are monuments of the Khmer civilization which flourished between the ninth and the thirteenth centuries, the highest artistic achievements of a culture which developed gradually through countless generations towards this brilliant, ultimate flowering, and then faded as swiftly as a cut bloom.

Its story began sometime in the dimly perceived centuries before the Christian era, when Indian merchant-adventurers first sailed across the ocean to the shores of South-East Asia. India was then—as again now—a country exerting an immense influence over neighbouring lands. Its early sons' achievements are too little recognized by people in the Western world. Their voyages in those ancient times were the opening of a glorious period in mankind's history which was marked during the next thousand years by the appearance of several states of Greater India with half-Indian, half-native civilizations that are amongst the noblest expressions of human genius. Their broken remains now stand in many places. Particularly beautiful are the 'buried cities' of Ceylon, the many-templed but long-deserted Burmese capital at Pagan, and numerous splendid sanctuaries, including the famous Borobudur, in Java. Greatest of them all are the ruins



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of Angkor—once the home of King Sihanouk's remote ancestors.

The Empire of the Khmers grew from earlier kingdoms in the region: first the state called Funan, then the realm of Chenla, and finally Kambuja, when the Khmers attained their glory. Each in turn succeeded its forerunner by a process of dynastic usurpation or conquest, yet all are stages in a coherent, unbroken, evolutionary political and cultural development leading to that final climax at Angkor.

Funan, therefore, was the beginning of it all. Its origin is related in a tale in which legend and history engagingly mingle. One night sometime in the first century A.D., it is related, a divine spirit visited an Indian youth named Kaundinya in his sleep, advising him to fetch a bow, board a ship and sail eastwards. Next morning Kaundinya remembered the dream and visited the temple where his midnight counsellor was supposed to reside. Sure enough, he found a bow and a quiver of arrows lying in its courtyard. Distinctly encouraged, he took the weapon, embarked on a merchant junk and set forth upon the ocean. The wind blew his vessel across the Bay of Bengal, through the Straits of Malacca, round the island now called Singapore, and up the South China Sea to Indo-China's coast. He sighted land at a place where a native queen named Willowleaf ruled a tiny country. A lady of enterprise and vigour, she launched her war canoe with intent to pillage the foreign merchantman. Kaundinya raised his magic bow and shot an arrow which pierced her craft from side to side. Taking fright, she submitted to this impressive representative of the stronger sex.

As was the custom amongst her simple people, Her Majesty was completely naked. Willowleaf did not even wear a fig-leaf. Deploring this evidence of savagery, Kaundinya at

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once presented his prisoner with a roll of cloth in which to wrap herself. Despite this prudery his capture of her was soon followed by her captivation of him, and they got married and lived happily ever after. As king and queen they consolidated their dominion, which became the historic state of Funan.

I like to think that there is a direct relationship between Willowleaf and the ladies who live nowadays on the same spot in the delta of the Mekong River; that she was the original mother, the ancestral Eve, of all the modern generations of damsels in Cochin-China — those black-haired, slanting-eyed beauties whose serene faces and slim, graceful and indeed willowy figures place them amongst the loveliest women in the world.

Funan remained the dominant power in that corner of Asia until about the year 550. During those centuries it became an empire ruling extensive vassal territories, and as it grew in physical strength it developed also in artistic attainment. From the humblest citizens to the kings, its people lived in wooden dwellings of which no trace remains today, but sometimes religious shrines were built of brick, and occasionally perhaps a temple was raised partly in stone. A few relics survive. We learn, too, that the population were skilled at working gold, silver, bronze, ivory and coral. Their styles of art and architecture were borrowed from India, for the most potent stimulus to their progress was the continuous arrival of Indian lordlings, priests and craftsmen amongst crowds of other colonists from the motherland. Many social customs and the two faiths of Hinduism and Buddhism were also imports from India.

Chinese visitors came periodically to Funan, but their concern was trade, not settlement; so their influence was largely confined to commercial matters. Nevertheless it is from



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Chinese travellers' writings, incorporated in later Chinese histories, that we learn most of what we know about Funan.

The indigenous, popular Funanese way of life was preserved in the people's homely habits and amusements; but these made little contribution to the higher forms of culture. The Funanese were a less creative race than the Khmers, who at that time lived further north. In the Funanese centuries the predominant influence was Indian, and during that period were laid the Indian foundations on which rose afterwards the grand edifice of Khmer civilization.

### CHENLA

Sometime in the mid-sixth century power slipped from Funan's grasp and passed into the hands of one of its hitherto vassal states — Chenla. This exchange of imperial greatness seems to have occurred through a disputed succession to a throne. An ambitious minor son of the royal house of Funan called Bhavavarman married the female heir to the crown of Chenla, and on the death of her father he became king of that land. Some years later, when his superior monarch in Funan died, he laid claim to that crown also. His credentials were doubtful on grounds of hereditary right, but he made them indisputable by military might. Seizing Funan by armed force, he subdued it to Chenla.

Chenla was the next-door territory to Funan lying farther north. More important, its fertile plains and valleys were the home of the Khmer people, a race of exceptional vigour. As often happens when an upstart dynasty first emerges, the earliest kings of the new line were men of fresh, remarkable ability. Bhavavarman himself, his successor Mahendravarman, and the next ruler, Isanavarman,<sup>1</sup> appear as memorable

<sup>1</sup> The suffix 'varman' became common to all the kings of Chenla and, later, Kam-buja. Derived from an Indian title, it can be translated as 'protector'.

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military and political leaders who organized, expanded, and consolidated Chenla until it exerted widespread authority. At first it was a loose-knit confederacy in which subordinate states still enjoyed a degree of autonomy, and Funan continued in that position for some time after its light was dimmed; but eventually Isanavarman, a masterful administrator, subdued it completely and incorporated it with other previously independent regions into a tightly unified, highly centralized Empire.

It is significant that, whereas our chief sources of information on the history of Funan are Chinese documents, after the triumph of Chenla native inscriptions cut on stones are equally important sources. Moreover, whereas the comparatively few local inscriptions which do survive from pre-Chenla times are almost invariably written in Sanskrit, those of Chenla were from nearly the beginning scratched partly in Khmer. In fact the rise of Chenla heralds the arrival of the Khmers to play their part in the human drama. Now this people of destiny step from the wings on to the stage of world history, and for the first time the glare of footlights reveals their features to the gaze of their vast audience, posterity.

An example of the impression which they created on a contemporary observer is contained in an account of life in Chenla during the reign of Isanavarman, written by a later Chinese historian from the notes of a visitor to his court:

'The men are small and black,' he says of these Khmers of the early seventh century, 'but many women are white. All roll up their hair and wear ear pendants. They are of a live and robust temperament. . . They make their ablutions each morning, clean their teeth with little pieces of poplar wood, and do not fail to read or recite their prayers. . . .'

From such glimpses of the people's character the author goes on to describe many customs connected with their



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homes and manners, marriages and funerals, commerce and religion. He remarks that their capital city 'counts more than 20,000 families . . . The kingdom contains more than thirty other cities, each peopled with many thousands of houses, and each ruled by a governor.' And he writes of their supreme lord, their high priest and ruler, the formidable King Isanavarman himself:

'Every three days the King goes solemnly to the audience hall and sits on a bed made of five pieces of sandalwood and ornamented with seven kinds of precious stones. Above this bed is a pavilion of magnificent cloth, whose columns are of inlaid wood. The walls are ivory, mixed with flowers of gold. The ensemble of this bed and the pavilion form a sort of little palace. . . .

'The King wears a girdle of *ki-pei* cotton, dawn-red, which falls to his knees. He covers his head with a bonnet laden with gold and precious stones, with pendants of pearls. On his feet are sandals of leather and sometimes of ivory; in his ears pendants of gold. His robe is always made of a very fine cloth. . . .

'Those who appear before the King touch the earth three times with the forehead, at the foot of the steps to the throne. If the King calls them and orders them to show their degrees, then they kneel, holding their hands on their shoulders. They go then to sit in a circle around the King, to deliberate on the affairs of the Kingdom. When the seance is finished they kneel again, prostrate themselves and return. More than a thousand guards dressed with cuirasses and armed with lances are ranged at the foot of the steps to the throne, in the halls of the palace, at the doors and peristyle. . . .'

The reader of these chronicles gains an impression of a society in which a strong, absolute monarch is supported by a capable aristocracy and obeyed by an industrious populace.

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That the Khmers already displayed remarkable creative genius is shown by the architectural monuments still standing on their deserted town sites. Widely scattered, they are not numerous. Fewer than a hundred Primitive Khmer temples dating from the mid-sixth to the mid-eighth centuries survive, and many of them are in a sadly ruined state. They are for the most part small, solitary brick sanctuaries with certain stone features, but they begin to be decorated with delicately designed, strongly carved floral groups and figures of monsters and deities. The statues of the gods who inhabited them have been discovered in fair numbers, and they show an artistry never surpassed — and perhaps never really equalled — in later, Classical Khmer times. They are simple and even austere, but are supple and vivid sculptures of human and divine beings, with that fresh, unspoilt purity of form which characterizes flowers just bursting from their buds, not yet revealing the rich flamboyance of full blooms.

The Chenla Empire represented only the prelude, the dawn, the springtime of Khmer greatness. It was a comparatively brief period, lasting little more than two centuries. King Isanavarman I seems to have been succeeded first by a lesser monarch, and then by one more ruler of considerable but unreliable abilities named Jayavarman I. His long reign was marked partly by proud conquests and partly by humiliating civil strife which ended, about the time of his death, in the division of the kingdom into two parts, Upper and Lower Chenla.

This fracture happened at a moment when another memorable offshoot of India, an Indianized Empire farther south, reached the apex of its power. Its dominion covered all the territories of present-day Sumatra, Java and Malaya; it produced the grand architectural masterpiece called Borobudur and dozens of other lovely temples; and it was governed



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by a dynasty of tremendous rulers called the 'Saliendra' or Kings of the Mountain. Their Malay subjects, with egos inflated no doubt by the sense of Imperial greatness in which they basked, went on buccaneering raids against foreign lands, ravaging the kingdoms of Champa and Annam neighbouring Chenla. Then a similar fate almost befell Chenla itself.

Towards the end of the eighth century the reigning King of the Mountain was offended by a chance remark made by the King of Chenla, which was reported to him at his court in Java. A later Arab traveller tells the tale of the incident and its extraordinary sequel.

Jayavarman I was dead, and his divided kingdom had fallen partly under the rule of a callow, impetuous young man. One morning this royal youth sat conversing with his chief minister. Their talk turned to the renowned Saliendra and dwelt on the many islands, immense population and undoubted splendour of his empire.

In a fit of jealousy His Majesty observed, 'I have one desire which I would like to satisfy.'

'What is that desire, O King?' inquired his faithful councillor.

'I wish to see before me on a plate,' remarked the monarch, 'the head of the King of Zagab' (Zagab being the name by which the Arab story-teller described Java).

Shocked by this morbid ambition, and fearful lest the intemperate mood of his master might lead him to utter some even more regrettable indiscretion, the minister answered quietly: 'I do not wish, O King, that my sovereign should express such a desire. The people of Khmer and Zagab have never manifested hatred towards each other, either in words or in acts. Zagab has never done us any harm . . . What the King has said should not be repeated.'

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But this sage advice angered the ruler, and he announced his awful desire louder, so that all the generals and nobles present at court could hear it—just as King Henry the Second of England in an impulsive moment uttered his terrible denunciation of Archbishop Thomas à Becket. In Chenla, however, the sequel to the royal speech was the very opposite of that enacted in Britain on the chancel steps of Canterbury Cathedral.

Report of the outburst of Chenla's king passed from mouth to mouth until it came to the knowledge of the King of Zagab himself. That potentate was a man not only of mature wisdom but also of regal pride. He summoned his principal adviser, told him what he had heard, and added: 'After the statement which this fool has made public, wishing to see my head on a plate because his is young and light, it is necessary for me to act. To disregard his insults would be to harm myself, to debase myself and to lower myself before him.'

The King of the Mountain then ordered his counsellor to keep their conversation secret, and to prepare a thousand ships and embark as many soldiers as they could take. When the fleet was ready, he himself went aboard, announcing that he would make a pleasure trip amongst his islands; but the armada's course was set instead for the mouth of a river on a distant coast which led to the capital of Chenla. There his troops took the Khmers by surprise. Having routed their army, he seized the city, surrounded the palace and captured the king. Let the Arab narrator continue the tale:

'The Maharajah'—as the scribe called the King of Zagab—'had public criers declare that he would guarantee the security of everybody; then he seated himself on the throne of the Khmer king, who had been made prisoner, and made the King and his minister appear before him.

'He said to the Khmer king: "What caused you to form a



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desire which was not in your power to satisfy, which would not have given you happiness if you had realized it, and would not even have been justified if it had been easily realizable?"

The Khmer king did not reply. The Maharajah continued: "You have manifested the desire to see before you my head on a plate; but if you also wished to seize my country and my kingdom or only to ravage a part of it, I would have done the same to Khmer. As you have expressed only the first of these desires, I am going to apply to you the treatment you wished to apply to me, and I will then return to my country without taking anything belonging to Khmer, either of great or small value. My victory will serve as a lesson to your successors; no one will again be tempted to undertake a task beyond his power nor desire more than the share given him by destiny; one will consider himself fortunate to have health when he can enjoy it."

'Then he had the head of the Khmer king cut off.

'Afterwards he invited the dead ruler's chief minister to pick a successor endowed with wisdom to appreciate this solemn warning, and then left at once to return to his country, without him or any of those accompanying him carrying away anything belonging to Khmer.'

The chronicle ends by recounting that when he had returned to his own palace the Maharajah seated himself on his throne and set before him a plate containing the head of the Khmer king. He had the head washed and embalmed, packed in a vase and sent to the new king who succeeded the decapitated Khmer ruler. With it the Maharajah sent a letter saying: 'I have been prompted to act as I have done against your predecessor because of the hatred he manifested against us, and we have chastened him (to give a lesson to those who wish to imitate him). We have applied to him the treatment he wished to apply to us. We think it wise to send you his

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head, for it is not necessary now to keep it here. We do not draw any glory from the victory we have won over him.'

This salutary lesson seemed to produce the desired effect. It appears from some records that the new King of Chenla may even have lived for a while as a hostage in Java, and that Chenla acknowledged the suzerainty of the Kings of the Mountain.

There was only a short night, however, between this clouded sunset of the Chenla kingdom and the brilliant sunrise of the Khmer Empire.

## KAMBUJA

The ruler chosen to succeed the unfortunate boaster turned out to be a happy choice. Known to history as Jayavarman II, he had eminent qualities of prudence, enterprise and ability. If it be true that immediately after his accession he stayed for a while in Java paying homage to the King of the Mountain, his sojourn was profitably spent, for some of the ideas on government which he introduced later in his own country seem to have been borrowed from the Śāliendra regime. Possibly the sagacious and humane statesman occupying its throne brought Jayavarman to Java not only as a subordinate to perform an act of allegiance, but also as a pupil to serve an apprenticeship in the supreme art of kingship.

The date of Jayavarman's return to Chenla is uncertain, but it was probably about the year 790. Then a young man of around twenty, he was to reign for sixty years and to establish the Khmer Empire firmly in the capital and territories, constitution and religion which it continued to enjoy for the next six centuries. During his life the word 'Kambuja' began to be employed to describe the country over which he ruled.



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In the first decade of his reign the problem of a site for his capital troubled him. He changed the place no fewer than four times. The ease with which the King of the Mountain had captured his predecessor's seat of government was a horrid warning, and Jayavarman determined to find a spot where he could develop a strong administration without interference from his foreign overlord. Possibly he had also to provide against the rivalry of lesser kings in Upper and Lower Chenla, whom he hoped — with justification, as it proved — to subdue as his feudatories.

His first choice fell on an inland site not far from Phnom Penh, the capital of modern Cambodia. Dissatisfied with that, he left the valley of the great Mekong River, migrated up its tributary the Tonle Sap, crossed the Great Lake and decided on the region where Angkor now stands. So began Angkor's extraordinary career. First he selected a spot a few miles from present-day Angkor Thom, and built a city there; then he moved to a place farther away beside what became later the West Baray, and built another city; and finally he shifted north to Phnom Kulen and raised a fortress-capital on that solitary mountain. There at last he felt secure, and celebrated the fact in the year 802 by a momentous act of statesmanship which shaped the thoughts and actions of the Khmer nation ever afterwards.

He summoned to his palace a renowned Brahman 'skilled in magic science' and ordered him to perform a rare ceremony which would break Kambuja's subservience to the Saliendra Empire and establish it as an independent state. In the history of the Khmers it was as great an event as the Declaration of Independence in the story of the American people.

The celebration did more than that. The priest performed a certain religious rite which created a personal

situation for Jayavarman no less important in the history and culture of the Khmers. It established that the king not only ruled by divine consent, but actually acquired the nature of a deity. He was the representative of Heaven on Earth, a sacred being to be worshipped as well as obeyed. Thus was established in Kambuja the cult of the king-god or 'Devavara', a new religion — or a development of an old religion — which Jayavarman perhaps borrowed from Java, where a similar conception of royalty prevailed.

The symbol of the king's divine authority was the royal 'lingam' — that extraordinary anatomical representation of masculine creative power which stands sculptured in stone in the place of honour in the cult's temples. It was no new conception; for ages the lingam had appeared as a phallic image representing the creative energy of Siva, and was called the Sivalingam. The official religion of Funan and Chenla proclaimed the worship of this Sivalingam; and Jayavarman's chief innovation seems to have been to identify the king with Siva, involving a sort of apotheosis of the earthly ruler during his lifetime. 'The King-God was conceived to be the eternal abstract essence of the king confounded with the divine essence and worshipped in the form of a lingam.'<sup>1</sup>

From Jayavarman's day onwards the kings of Kambuja were all regarded as demi-gods, and the worship of the royal lingam was the official state religion. To house this sacred symbol each king in turn built a new supremely holy temple; and several of these shrines survive, some of the mightiest and loveliest monuments of Khmer civilization.

To serve the lingam with proper ritual Jayavarman appointed a high priest, in whose family the office of pontiff became hereditary for many generations. He was assisted by a formidable hierarchy of lesser clerics. Only centuries later,

<sup>1</sup> Lawrence Palmer Briggs, *The Ancient Khmer Empire*.



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when Buddhism began to make headway in Kambuja, did an occasional king adopt that different religion; but even then custom, and no doubt the vested interests of the great ecclesiastics, maintained the cult of the Devaraja as a principal form of worship.

Few contemporary records of Jayavarman's reign have been unearthed, and later inscriptions do not relate in detail the manner or extent of the expansion of his rule over feudatory kinglets. Reliable records made within fifty years of his death indicate that at that time the Khmer Empire's boundaries were almost as wide as they ever became, and it is safe to assume that much of this growth occurred during his long, forceful rule.

Towards the end of his life he felt his regime so secure that residence in a fortress on a mountain-top was no longer necessary; and he changed the site of his capital once more, returning to a former city in the lowlands. The prime reason for this move was probably that, feeling safe from military conquest, he wished to establish his centre of government where food supplies for a large population were more easily procurable; so he settled in a place called Hariharalaya. Near it the Great Lake teemed with fish, and all around stretched a fertile plain ideal for growing rice. These advantages maintained Hariharalaya as the chief city during the next two reigns, and determined that subsequent shifts of the capital should never stray more than a few miles away. Thus the neighbourhood is now a scene where the ruins of a series of capitals of the Classic Khmer age crowd together.

In Hariharalaya Jayavarman built his last royal palace, sacred temple and ruling city; and there, in 850, he died. None of his buildings remains today except in a badly ruined state. His most durable monument was more impressive. It was the Khmer Empire itself, of which he was the founder.

He was succeeded by his son, Jayavarman III. Though the new king reigned for more than a quarter-century, we know little about him except that he loved to hunt wild elephants, and that he probably met his death whilst engaged in that exciting sport. He in turn was succeeded by a cousin, Indravarman I. If we are to believe contemporary inscriptions written about him, Indravarman was an active and able man; but in these matters the scratched words are not necessarily reliable evidence. The Khmer monarchs were not noted for modesty, and some of the praise showered on them by the royal engravers is flattery so outrageous as to be nauseating. Such exaggerated tributes became customary, and were a sort of poet's licence affected by the biographers of kings.

Perhaps the worst examples of these extravagances are those written about Indravarman's successor, Yasovarman I. He takes the prize for permitting his subjects to exceed all decency in composing sycophantic descriptions of his virtues. A mere statement that he was the 'best of kings' is mild. In typical other passages he is referred to as a 'unique bundle of splendours, whose power was mortal to his enemies', 'in all the sciences and all the sports, in the arts, the languages and the writings, in dancing, singing and all the rest, he was as clever as if he had been the first inventor of them', and 'in seeing him the Creator was astonished, and seemed to say to himself, "Why did I create a rival for myself in this king?"'

For many years historians were taken in by these and similar boastings about Yasovarman. A misunderstanding of the pompous accounts of his prowess in various spheres, combined with a misreading of certain other facts, led them to acclaim him as the greatest conqueror and builder, statesman and ruler in all the long line of Khmer kings. To him were attributed, for example, some of the finest of Angkor's



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buildings — the wonderfully walled and moated city of Angkor Thom, the brilliantly bizarre temple of the Bayon, and the supremely beautiful Angkor Vat. For a long time modern scholars sang his praises with as much gusto as did the ancient scribes.

Much of this error sprang from a wrong dating of the buildings referred to, which were attributed to the latter years of the ninth century, when Yasovarman happened to sit on the throne. When further research revealed that even the oldest of them was not made until two centuries later Yasovarman's reputation began to suffer a decline; and as other fresh evidence reduced some of his additional alleged achievements to lesser proportions the process of 'debunking' him continued, until it went too far in the opposite direction. He came to be regarded as a fraud.

The pendulum of appreciation of him has now swung back to a more reasonable and just estimate. He was indeed a ruler of considerable attainment. At first he maintained his capital at Hariharalaya; but then he moved it and did in fact construct by the labour of a myriad slaves an impressive new city. It was not, however, Angkor Thom with the fabulous Bayon as its main temple, but a place centred slightly farther east with the Bakheng — still visible — as its principal shrine.

This city of Yasovarman — called Yasodharapura after him — though less splendid in architecture than its successors, was an astonishing place. Its extent was actually larger than that of later Angkor Thom, stretching over sixteen square kilometres. To build and sustain it the King altered the course of the Siem Reap River, dug the huge reservoir now called the East Baray, formed in addition some eight hundred artificial ponds within the municipal precincts, and raised other splendid buildings besides the Bakheng. The size of

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his achievement was to some extent deceptive, for not all the area of the city was filled with streets and buildings. Much of it was laid out in modest hamlets scattered amongst rice-fields. However, in several other centres of his realm he raised notable buildings. His critics may say what they like, but all this is no insignificant achievement by a man who ruled little more than ten years.

During the next half-century five monarchs governed the Empire. The first two<sup>1</sup> were sons of Yasovarman, and they maintained his new capital. Their reigns were undistinguished, though the authors of their inscriptions would have us believe otherwise. It was reported, for example, that the younger, 'victorious, surpassing Kama<sup>2</sup> by his beauty, dissipating the fogs, possessing all the talents, was a moon among kings'; but the moon seems to have been in a permanent state of eclipse.

His successor was probably a usurper, and he founded a new capital a hundred miles away. There he erected worthy buildings which hold a place in the evolution of Khmer architecture, and there his son ruled after him. But not for long. Whether he died a natural death or was forcibly removed from his pleasant surroundings is unknown. What is known is that after a few years a scion of a more direct line of the royal house came to the throne with the title of Rajendravarman II.

Among his first acts was a return to the earlier capital, where a contemporary chronicler records that 'he restored the holy city of Yasodharapura, long deserted, and rendered it superb and charming by erecting there houses ornamented with shining gold and palaces glittering with precious stones'.

<sup>1</sup> I shall not, generally, weary the reader with the names of the long succession of kings, except when they were men of outstanding character or significance.

<sup>2</sup> The God of Love.



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He did not, however, renew the Bakheng as its principal temple. It was now an established custom for each successive king to build a new sanctuary to house his lingam during his lifetime and to be his mausoleum after his death, and the Bakheng had performed both those functions for Yaso-varman. Rajendravarman therefore dedicated a new temple, now generally believed to have been on the site of the present Phimeanakas, slightly farther north. Since this must be the central point of his capital, the whole reconstructed city was also shifted in that direction, partly overlapping the site of its predecessor. Such moves were not difficult owing to the circumstance that all the dwellings and most of the important buildings were made of light timber. Only the temples and other sacred structures were fashioned of brick and stone, and survived the constant flittings.

Rajendravarman's reign was apparently one of peace and prosperity, for it was a period of remarkable building activity. His religious foundations form important links in the chain of Khmer art. They spread far and wide. A recent attempt to assess the magnitude of the Khmer Empire at that time — in the year 960 — allots to it all of present-day Cambodia, Cochin-China and Laos, nearly all of Thailand and sections of what are now Annam, Burma and China.

Rajendravarman died in 968 and was succeeded by his son, Jayavarman V. With the crown the newcomer also inherited the tranquillity of his sire's reign, in spite of the typically bombastic, bellicose declaration of an inscription that 'when he puts himself in march, under the shock of his armies the earth with its mountains is agitated as the sea is disturbed by a tempest. . . . With the noisy drums, to which are mixed agreeably the sonorous copper cymbals, with the *karadis*, the *timiles*, the lutes, the flutes, the *bheris*, the *kahalas* and the multitudes of shells, he inspires terror in his enemies.

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When, in his fury, his lion roar was heard . . . hostile kings fled to the depths of the forest.'

The peace of the two reigns lasted for almost sixty years, enabling the period to be one of fruitful cultural development. Jayavarman's court was filled with illustrious ministers, scholars, poets, ecclesiastics and other dignitaries, among them many distinguished royal ladies who held high positions in political and religious as well as social life. It was an age of tolerance and learning, of philosophic questing and artistic achievement. Contemplating it, as it is reflected in plentiful contemporary inscriptions, we gain an impression of a society unusually gifted and creative progressing steadily towards a climax of intellectual, aesthetic and spiritual flowering.

The gracious little temple of Banteai Srei, one of the most precious gems of Khmer architecture, is a typical expression of the time.

Jayavarman died in 1001 and was succeeded by King Udayadityavarman I. Of all the names in the list of Khmer rulers his is one of the most difficult to read, pronounce or remember; but fortunately it is unnecessary to do any of those things, for he was of the least possible importance. He occupied the throne little longer than a player in the first round of a game of musical chairs occupies a seat; in the second round he was eliminated. He wore his crown for a few months, and then disappeared. No one bothered to note when, where or how. His successor is recorded by the title of Jayaviravarman; but, again, considerable mystery surrounds this personage. No doubt his claim to the throne was proper, but that turned out to be of little account. Udayadityavarman and he were mere shadows flitting across the Kambujan stage; the substantial figure was Suryavarman, a foreign invader who, immediately after Jayavarman's death, landed with an army from Malaya and announced that he was the



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rightful heir, through his mother. She was alleged to be descended by the maternal line from Indravarman I, a tale which could scarcely bear examination. But what Suryavarman lacked in legal title he more than possessed in strong character. Advancing slowly but steadily across Kambuja from his original base, he first proclaimed himself ruler in the outer edges of the kingdom and then progressively extended his area of authority. He apparently enjoyed support from various dissident elements in the country, and by 1006 reached and captured the capital. Although Jayaviravarman maintained the fight for another few years, his cause was doomed. He had the misfortune to meet as rival one of the most forceful figures in Khmer history.

Suryavarman reigned for half a century, until the year 1050. He was one of those formidable kings who, after the initial bloody struggle to secure a throne, gives his subjects uninterrupted peace based on undisputed strength. None dared to oppose the conqueror's power, and so his people enjoyed another long period of prosperous serenity. Throughout it the creative urge of the Khmers was active. Their civilization was now gathering its strength, perfecting its genius and approaching its noblest expressions.

Characteristic of the period was an immense amount of building. Under Suryavarman's energetic impulse splendid monuments were constructed in many parts of the country. In particular he developed further the grandeur of his capital. Above all, he did some admirable town planning and new construction in the heart of the city, giving Angkor the remarkably spacious, dignified and beautiful appearance which we can still perceive in spite of its ruined state. Under the inspiration of his presiding mind, and by the skilled hands of his architects and builders, the Angkor which we know began to take shape; the Palace and the Royal

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Enclosure, the Grand Plaza with its ceremonious towers, the splendid avenues and marvellous new system of waterways were all designed then. Outside the city important public works were constructed, the most notable being the huge reservoir called the West Baray, which provided irrigation for the peasants' rice-fields on the wide plain adjoining the capital. No one can tell how much of the responsibility for all this belonged to the King himself, but there seems good evidence that he and some of the foreigners who had followed in the wake of his victorious invasion of Kambuja provided a valuable new stimulus to architectural creativeness.

When at last he 'went to the skies', as a contemporary chronicler put it, he was succeeded by a second Udayadityavarman, a 'prince of great energy' who, the scribe adds charmingly, 'excelled in seducing women to his will by his beauty, warriors by his heroism, sages by his good qualities, the people by his power, and Brahmans by his charity'. What more can a man want? In intervals between seducing women, warriors, sages and others by his various magnetic virtues this paragon induced builders to create various fresh edifices, including yet another central sanctuary to contain his lingam in his lifetime and his corpse after his death. This was the Baphuon, the largest building of its kind yet raised by the Khmers. It still remains second only to the Bayon in size amongst the monuments of Angkor Thom.

There seem to have been religious disputings and political revolts during his reign. The times became troubled, and in their midst a new king came to the throne in 1066. His name was Hashavarman, and he certainly made a hash of things. It is interesting to pause and reflect that at the same moment in distant England William the Conqueror was landing and fighting the Battle of Hastings. In Britain the new king



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quickly brought peace, law and progress; but in Kambuja strife continued for the next two generations. Through the reigns of three rulers rival claimants to the throne quarrelled, warfare became chronic, and the kingdom was sometimes partitioned; but finally, in 1113, another formidable personality named Suryavarman II restored unity and peace to Kambuja.

So powerful did he become that he engaged in foreign adventures, his most ambitious effort being the military conquest of the famous neighbouring kingdom of the Chams. After an initial victory, however, his armies suffered a series of defeats, and he turned to building instead of fighting. His battles are commemorated on the massive bas-reliefs of his great temple, Angkor Vat—for he was the author of that supreme masterpiece of Khmer creation.

Even through the destructive strife of recent reigns the Kambujans' genius for constructive art had continued to express itself in several excellent new buildings. Architecture was evolving towards its grand climax, and in size, magnificence and beauty Suryavarman's funerary temple has no peer among all the unforgettably powerful and lovely remains of Khmer civilization. Its date is about the middle of the twelfth century; and so this finest of all ecclesiastical buildings in the East is a contemporary of such Western cathedrals as Chartres and Notre Dame de Paris.

Suryavarman maintained the several times renewed Yasodharapura as his capital, but he does not appear to have added appreciably to the distinction of the city itself. Angkor Vat stands outside it. Possibly he extended its area to include the temple; yet this seems unlikely. In that case he broke with tradition by building his mausoleum not only away from the centre of his capital, but actually at a small distance beyond the city walls. In religious matters he was a reformer, and

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this departure from hallowed custom would be in keeping with his unorthodoxy.

The date of Suryavarman's death is uncertain, but sometime about 1150 he was succeeded by a cousin. No local inscriptions of the period have survived, and all our information is gained either from later inscriptions in Kambuja or from contemporary evidence in Champa and other neighbouring lands. The generation was one of internal revolt and external wars, with much interruption and destruction of building.

The new king ruled for only a few years. The following story concerning the succession to his throne is probably correct. The legitimate heir was his son Jayavarman, but a relative named Yasovarman made a rival claim. Prince Jayavarman was a devout Buddhist and a man of strong character. Faithful to his religious principles, he abhorred the thought of spilling blood; so he refused to engage in fratricidal strife, renounced the crown and retired to voluntary exile in next-door Champa. That is our engaging first glimpse of the most impressive personality in Khmer history.

Yasovarman II did not profit much from his possession of the crown. After five years of political unrest he was slain by rebels fighting for an ambitious upstart, one Tribhuvanandityavarman. When the exile Jayavarman heard of the revolt, he hastened back to Kambuja either to support Yasovarman or to assert his own claim to rule. But he was too late; by the time that he arrived Yasovarman was already dead and Tribhuvanandityavarman sat firmly on the throne. So, once more averse to shedding blood, the good Buddhist again withdrew.

Tribhuvanandityavarman's ambitions were also doomed to frightful punishment. War broke out between Kambuja and Champa, and the Chams invaded Kambuja, defeated its



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army, sacked its capital and slew its king. For the Khmers this was the darkest hour since, three hundred and fifty years earlier, the King of the Mountain overran Chenla and beheaded their ruler. The disaster was followed by a short period of anarchy; but salvation was at hand in the person of Prince Jayavarman. His moment of destiny had arrived, and he returned to his country to become its leader.

When he was crowned in 1181 Jayavarman VII must already have been more than fifty years old. Whether because the sight of his pillaged capital roused him to fury, or because as he grew older his character turned sour, he forswore his earlier Buddhist gentleness and resorted to martial power. Just outside ruined Yasodharapura he inflicted a decisive defeat on the Cham aggressors, and then cleared his kingdom of these foreign invaders. After thorough military preparation he then set forth on a campaign of revenge against Champa. It was a violently successful affair. His army swept through the country, sacked its capital and dethroned its king. So vengeance was complete in every detail, perhaps following the scrupulous precedent established centuries earlier by the King of the Mountain of an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a head for a head and a city for a city. For the next twenty years Champa remained a mere province of Kambuja, ruled by a princeling who was Jayavarman's stooge.

Jayavarman extended his masterful influence east, south and west, and the Empire became wider and mightier than at any time before or since. His Majesty's energy was insatiable. The zealous mystic and vigorous warrior was also a tireless builder. In all these directions his creative urge was tremendous. The destruction of his capital by the Chams had been fearful; its wooden houses were burnt, its gilded temples robbed and its spacious palace ruined. Jayavarman set to

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work to reconstruct the place on Suryavarman's plan. But the task would take long to complete, and in the meantime he conjured into being a smaller, temporary city where he could live and hold court. It was close to the permanent capital — so near that when both were finished the two moats surrounding their outer walls flowed within a mile of each other. The smaller settlement was built on the site of his decisive battle against the Chams and named 'Fortunate City of Victory' — Preah Khan. Its remains today are amongst the most enchanting ruins in Cambodia.

The great ruler built several other famous places. In close proximity to Preah Khan he raised beautiful Banteai Kdei and lovely Ta Prohm, with smaller gems of architecture like the little shrine of Neak Pean and the vast bathing-pool called Sra Srang. Farther afield he made such grand centres as Banteai Chmar and Preah Khan of Kampong Svai. It may be that parts of this astonishing series of constructions were started before he ascended the throne, but the greater portions of them all are attributed to his reign. It is said that the work was often hastily and carelessly done, but I shall reserve comments on that until I describe in more detail in a later chapter these singularly gracious buildings.

Jayavarman's greatest undertaking was the recreation of his main capital, now famous as Angkor Thom. Its central temple is the Bayon, the most celebrated Khmer monument after Angkor Vat. Close by are the sweeping stone terraces of Jayavarman's palace, and the whole city is enclosed by the high walls, magnificent gateways and broad moat which still survive. Never was building activity more feverishly and brilliantly sustained. In addition to splendid temples, palaces and cities the King constructed a widespread system of roads throughout his Empire, and built hospitals for the sick, rest houses for travellers and wayside shrines for the devout. As



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his creative energy thus expended itself in various fields, Jayavarman's sense of his own pre-eminent significance grew. Before long he regarded himself as not only wholly royal but also wholly divine. Himself a Buddhist, he believed that he was a living Buddha. This led him to unbelievable actions. The massive stone faces which gaze down from all the sides of all the towers of his city's gateways, and from every facet of every pinnacle on his fabulous temple, the Bayon, are probably idealized images of the king-god himself. He became a megalomaniac.

We modern pygmies can gain an impression of this ancient giant's features from more realistic representations of him in various other contemporary sculptures. In several bas-reliefs decorating his buildings his figure is portrayed, and in the museum at Phnom Penh is cherished a more-than-life-size statue of the great man. It shows him sitting cross-legged in peaceful contemplation like the Buddha. Perhaps his broad, strong body (though its arms are broken) is more reminiscent of a wrestler reclining before a bout; and his head, too, gives an instant impression of power, being massive like a prize-fighter's, with hair so closely cropped that the shape of its large skull is revealed. Nevertheless his serenely closed eyes and mysteriously smiling lips convey a sense of inner spiritual calm—yet the firm, square jaw is, again, a mark of a man of inflexible will.

His historical reputation has undergone a strange transformation. At the beginning of this century he was considered one of the minor rulers of Kambuja, for (as I have written earlier) his architectural masterpieces at Angkor were then credited to Yasovarman I, a predecessor by three centuries. Other of his achievements lay as yet unrevealed in inscribed hieroglyphics, only later deciphered. Gradually, as subsequent researches exposed his manifold works, and as

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poor Yasovarman's reputation suffered a decline, Jayavarman's fame grew — until he was rightly hailed as the most gifted of Khmer princes.

Yet if he was the greatest ruler that his people ever knew, he was also the most potent cause of their eventual downfall; if his court was the richest in the history of the Khmers, his extravagance was the origin of their later poverty; and if his Empire spread wider than it ever reached before, its very outsize was a reason for its subsequent crumbling. Jayavarman's conquests in war and constructions in peace called for an expenditure of money, energy and labour by his countrymen which, in a supreme effort, they maintained faithfully and gloriously during his potent rule, but which left them exhausted afterwards. He overworked, overtaxed and overstrained them, with the result that within a few generations his Empire collapsed. The wondrous, beautiful flower of Khmer civilization withered.

In about the year 1220 Jayavarman died, when his life must have spanned almost a century. The conches and drums, gongs and flutes that squealed, piped and throbbed at his funeral sounded the death knell also of Khmer power. Almost immediately the Empire began to shrink. Champa was the first vassal state to go, falling away and regaining its independence within a year or two of the tyrannical king's death. After that the decline was gradual but steady.

The process was stimulated by the appearance on the scenes of a new people, the Thais. The period was the mid-thirteenth century, when the Mongols had conquered China and Kublai Khan sought to bring the whole Orient under his imperial sway. The pressure of Mongol advance in the north drove the Thais south into Indo-China, where they established a centre of power at Sukhothai. Before the end of the century they extended their rule over almost all of what is



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now Thailand and substantial parts of northern Malaya. That was at the expense of Khmer provinces, though Kambuja proper still remained intact.

At the same time an even more fatal incursion than that of Thai warriors penetrated Kambuja itself. This was the arrival of priests preaching the Hinayanist creed of Buddhism. In contrast to the Mahayanist Buddhism to which Jayavarman VII and other earlier devotees adhered, and to Sivaism which was generally the religion of the Khmer upper classes, it was a simple, democratic, poverty-loving faith with a wide appeal to humble citizens. In many ways it was a contradiction to the highly ceremonious, institutional and hierarchical creed which had required the building of magnificent temples and the support of pompous ecclesiastics. As it spread, currents of criticism and discontent began to flow among the ordinary population in the ancient capital.

Nevertheless life in the court continued much as before. For long the effects of a dwindling Empire and a sceptical populace were hardly noticeable there. Royalty seemed as wealthy, aristocracy as refined, ministers as wise and scholars as learned as ever. It was another age of intellectual distinction; but its culture was receptive, not creative, passive not active. Since the death of Jayavarman VII a century earlier no great new temple had been built. That was a significant omission in a civilization of noble architecture and building. Inspiration, somehow, was lacking; and so were money and labour. The loss of rich provinces with large populations deprived the crown of the revenues and slaves without which the earlier monuments could never have been raised.

After the fierce and brilliant sunset of Jayavarman's reign, the kingdom was drained of light. Dusk fell upon the scene, a twilight gentle and reposeful, but ominously still and quiet, a prelude to a dark and stormy night.

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I need not record the names of the dozen kings who followed Jayavarman in the next two centuries. They made no recognizable impact on history. The initiative in South-East Asia had passed elsewhere. In 1350 the Thais moved their capital from Sukhothai to Ayuthia, much nearer to Angkor. Thence they could raid Kambuja more easily and frequently, and from 1350 to 1430 wars between the Thais and the Khmers were almost incessant. At the same period another people, the Laotians, became restive in the north-east, and they carved from one-time Kambujan dependencies a new kingdom called Laos. In the south the Chams launched some devastating raids in the Mekong delta. The Khmers were encircled by foes.

At length, in 1430, the Thais made a mass invasion and attacked Angkor Thom. After a seven months' siege the capital surrendered. It was sacked, and much of its rich booty was carried off to Thailand. Dramatic events followed. The Thai king placed the crown of Kambuja on his son's head; but this was more than the Khmer heir could tolerate. Contriving the assassination of the foreign puppet, he re-entered Angkor and celebrated there his own coronation. But the old capital was now too close to the aggressive Thais for security and comfort, and he moved his seat, first (in 1432) westward along the river Tonle Sap to Basan, and then (in 1434) farther west to the site of Phnom Penh on the banks of the Mekong — where it remains to this day.

I must emphasize that Kambuja, the country, was never conquered by the Thais; only Angkor, its ancient capital, fell. Kambuja remained a free, independent national territory ruled by its own king from a new seat of power. Even the grand old city, magnificent Angkor Thom, was not long occupied by the enemy. Their invasion was not a sustained campaign of conquest, but only a successful raid. Almost



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immediately the Thais retreated from Angkor, carrying with them to Ayuthia most of its removable treasure – including, as King Sihanouk had told me, the Royal Corps de Ballet. The place was never re-established as Kambuja's capital. It lay too near the Thai border, too exposed – untenable. So, just as six hundred years earlier King Jayavarman II moved his capital from the neighbourhood of Phnom Penh to Angkor to escape attack by Kambuja's then most dangerous foes, the Malays of the south, so now King Ponha Yat removed his capital from Angkor to the site of Phnom Penh for security against the latest most formidable foes, the Thais of the north-west. With that sole change the Kambujan kingdom, already stripped by earlier wars of its outer dominions, maintained unimpaired its national existence.

Yet that change was supremely symbolic. It marked the very end of the great, historic period of Khmer grandeur. Angkor was the chief expression of a distinct culture – originally inspired from India, but long since grown native – which had flourished for centuries and now finally succumbed. It was a culture embodied in handsome cities, magnificent temples, wonderful sculptures and poetic inscriptions. As one student has written: 'The Khmers left the world no systems of administration, education or ethics like those of China; no literatures, religions or systems of philosophy, like those of India; but here Oriental architecture and decoration reached its culminating point.'<sup>1</sup> That was what came to an end when Angkor fell, and that is why the ruins of Angkor are amongst humanity's most precious heritages.

Such great works were not continued by the Kambujans when they moved their capital to Phnom Penh. It was not, however, the 'Thais' capture and fleeting occupation of Angkor that caused the end of a civilization. That tragedy

<sup>1</sup> Lawrence Palmer Briggs, *The Ancient Khmer Empire*.

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had been shaping already over several generations. Khmer genius had been declining, had been fading ever since it grew exhausted in Jayavarman VII's reign.

Various causes contributed to the collapse. Jayavarman's orgy of building had produced a distaste, from surfeit, for such activity. Later the loss to the Empire of rich, well-populated provinces reduced the supplies of both money and slaves; and whilst the upper, educated classes who customarily provided the creative urge for constructive works in a great civilization became decadent, the lower orders, who usually obediently supported their efforts, grew discontented and even rebellious. For them Khmer glory had been a crushing burden. They paid taxes, gave their labour, and were conscripted to build mausoleums for splendid kings, to maintain in luxury hordes of ecclesiastics, and to perform services for rapacious gods. The religion which they were forced to acknowledge never really commanded their deep spiritual allegiance. The common Khmer people, like most Asian peasantry, had always remained animists at heart, worshipping the spirits of woods and rivers and fields. So when Hinayanist Buddhism was brought to them by multitudes of humble priests who embraced poverty in place of wealth, lived in grass huts instead of palaces, and loved the people rather than the aristocracy, they turned away gladly from subservience to the old state religion and accepted the new. Their kings and leaders, too, became converts to gentler, milder teachings whose doctrines of resignation and 'nirvana' in another world were welcome to a weary people longing for rest.



## CHAPTER THREE

# The Life of the Khmers

**I**N the year 1296, Kublai Khan's successor on the dragon throne of China, an individual named Timur Khan who has no other particular claim to fame, sent an embassy to Kambuja to arrange that the Khmers should pay homage to the Mongol Emperor. One member of the mission was a man called Chou Ta-Kuan, who seems to have been the equivalent of a commercial counsellor. He and his colleagues stayed for a year in Angkor Thom, and on their return to China Chou Ta-Kuan wrote for the Imperial Court a long report on society and conditions in Kambuja. It presents a valuable account of life among the Khmers at the end of the thirteenth century.

Jayavarman VII had been dead for almost a hundred years. The supreme moment of Khmer greatness had passed and the kingdom was in decline. But the deterioration was slow and gradual. Though some vassal states had freed themselves from Khmer rule, the homeland of the master race itself was intact; and although the Khmers were no longer actively engaged in great works of creation, they still passively enjoyed the benefits of their civilization. The destruction of the Thai invasions had so far troubled them little, and the final disaster of the sack of Angkor was more than a century away in the future.

The nation was conservative and still lived in much the same manner as did their forefathers of earlier times; so Chou Ta-Kuan's account can be read as if it were a description of life in Kambuja in the reign of Jayavarman VII or at any other time during the next few generations.

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He reported that parts of Kambuja were mountainous and others were lowland. Much of both was under forest. In those untamed places deer and monkeys, bears and rhinoceroses, tigers and elephants roamed. The birds included peacocks, parakeets, falcons, jungle-fowl, crow-pheasants and diverse other creatures. Wild-duck, swans and cormorants frequented the Great Lake close to Angkor Thom, and in that vast inland sea lived many kinds of fish, with giant shrimps, turtles and crocodiles. The crocodiles, according to Chou Ta-Kuan, were 'as large as boats, which have four feet and are exactly like a dragon, but have no horns; their belly is very delicious'. Presumably he meant that the belly was delicious as a morsel for eating, not as a place of habitation for mortals whom the monster itself had swallowed.

In the hills lived wild cattle, wild horses and wild men. Of the tribesmen Chou Ta-Kuan wrote: 'They do not live in houses; but followed by their family they wander in the mountains carrying a clay jar on the head. If they meet a wild animal, they kill it with a bow or spear, strike fire with a stone, cook the beast and eat it. . . . Their nature is savage and their poisons are very dangerous.'

These primitive peoples were often caught and brought into the towns for sale as slaves to the civilized citizens. 'They are regarded as animals,' reported the Chinese observer, 'and are bought and sold for a small price.' In Jayavarman's reign slaves had been provided by conquered dependent populations in vassal territories of the Empire, but this source had now dried up. Cultured and wealthy Khmer society was based on slave labour. 'Some have more than a hundred servants,' wrote Chou. 'Only the very poor have none at all.'

The lot of slaves was typical of that in most such societies. 'They can only sit and lie under the house,' continued the chronicler. 'For service they can go up into the house, but



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then they kneel, salaam and prostrate themselves before advancing. They call their master and mistress father and mother. If they commit a fault, they are beaten; they bow the head and do not dare to make the least movement. . . . If a slave tries to escape and is retaken, he is marked in blue on the face. Sometimes they are fastened by iron rings on the neck, arms or legs.'

The hill-tribes and other inhabitants of the jungle gathered forest products like beeswax, gamboge, resin, rattan, bamboo, honey, ivory, rhinoceros-horn, birds' plumes and wild fruits. They bartered these in return for their own modest requirements, as the more primitive tribes still do in Indo-China, Burma and Borneo.

A large area of the plain round Angkor was under cultivation, growing rice and other grains. The annual flooding of the Great Lake helped to fertilize the soil, and the Khmers' wonderful system of artificial tanks and canals irrigated the land efficiently. Among the paddy-fields were villages where a teeming population of peasants lived, using ploughs, hoes and sickles at their work. They harvested three or four crops a year, and in addition grew vegetables, sugar-cane and fruit. They probably used water-buffaloes for ploughing, and kept pigs, sheep, goats, cattle, horses, geese and chickens. Salt they obtained by evaporation on the sea-shore along the coast. They knew not the secret of fermenting grains, but made wines from sugar-cane, honey, rice and wild leaves.

Chou Ta-Kuan, who naturally regarded all non-Chinese as barbarians, thought the people coarse and very dark, though he added that 'in the palaces and great mansions, where they are sheltered from the sun, many of the women are as white as jade.'

The tropical sun was indeed exceedingly warm, and the

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people's dress was scanty. Both men and women wore only a loin-cloth. When they walked out-of-doors they wrapped a wide band of cloth or silk (according to their wealth and rank) round their lower bodies, like a sarong. Usually they went naked above the waist, as well as barefoot. They contrived their hair in a chignon with no ornaments, but wore gold rings and bracelets. Even the working women wore gold trinkets, and 'men and women alike oil themselves with perfumes of santal, musk and other essences'.

The market towns were almost as small and rustic as the villages. Most of the petty commerce — and there was little other internal trade — was conducted by women. They owned no permanent shops, but simply laid a mat on the ground beside a road, spread their wares upon it, and squatted there chewing betel-nut and gossiping with neighbouring stall-holders as customers came and went. It was a scene that is still reproduced every day in thousands of wayside bazaars all over South-East Asia. For small transactions payment was made in rice, cereals or similar goods, but larger exchanges were made for gold or silver.

Chinese traders were quite common. According to their observant fellow-countryman, these characteristically zealous business-men from Cathay 'like this country, where little clothing is necessary. Rice is easy to gain, women easy to find, houses easy to manage, furniture easy to obtain, commerce easy to direct'. They brought merchandize which was popular with the Khmers, such as coloured silks, lacquer trays, blue-and-white porcelain, umbrellas and fanciful combs, as well as foodstuffs, valuable metals and other useful materials.

The educated people congregated in large centres. There were considerable distinctions between the various social classes, marking great differences in their wealth. The size



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and materials of houses, for example, depended on the rank of their occupants. Only the higher orders could use tiles for buildings; the lower must roof their humble dwellings with thatch. But almost invariably the materials employed for domestic architecture—including princely palaces—were so unsubstantial that few remnants of these structures survive today.

There was no plumbing, nor provision for sewage in the homes. People took their baths in public in the pools and canals which were so plentiful, and for other toilet purposes dug holes in their plots of ground which afterwards 'they cover again with grass'. 'There are women who urinate standing', observed Chou Ta-Kuan. 'It is ridiculous.' I agree; it does look ridiculous. I have seen old countrywomen in the main street of Den Pasar, the capital of idyllic Bali, halt amidst the seething crowd beside a pavement, stand astraddle an open drain and do exactly what Chou Ta-Kuan described. But these gentle old ladies do not think it any more ridiculous to perform such a harmless natural act in public than did the women of ancient Kambuja. Custom changes very slowly in the East.

Chou Ta-Kuan was indefatigable in his researches. He wrote at length about the social habits and manners of the Khmers, describing their arrangements for a mother's comfort in childbirth, the strange rite of Buddhist priests deflowering girls, the prevalence of various illnesses (which he ascribed to the people's too frequent baths and incessant washing of the head), the celebrations held on feast days, the annual custom of collecting a jar of human gall for presentation to the king, the system of trial of offenders by ordeal, the punishments meted out to criminals, the methods of disposing of the dead, and all sorts of other usages.

'They do not use coffins for the dead', he wrote, 'but a

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kind of mat, which they cover with a cloth. In the funeral cortège they use flags, banners and musical instruments. Along the road they sow grilled rice. Outside the city, in some distant and uninhabited place, they abandon the body and go away. They await for vultures and dogs to come and devour it. . . .'

He gave a rather muddled account of the prevalent religions, for his understanding of their mysteries was far from profound. Sometimes he seemed unable to make head or tail of them, but it is clear from his report that a significant change had occurred since the days of Jayavarman VII. Then the worship of the Devaraja was still the state cult, maintaining a hierarchy of grandiose, aristocratic clergy. When Chou Ta-Kuan wrote, its influence had dwindled, and the principal popular faith appeared to be Hinayanist Buddhism with its preaching of simplicity, poverty and a sort of spiritual democracy. The people's attachment to the idea of a king-god had loosened; the power of the high ecclesiastics was reduced; and the religious guides of the man in the street were humble, yellow-robed bonzes chosen from the common people themselves, who wandered every morning through the streets with empty bowls begging for rice. There were thousands of them.

There is another document exactly contemporary with Jayavarman which depicts the way of life of the Khmers in his reign. It is the bas-relief on the walls of his supreme temple, the Bayon. Like a vast, carved picture-book, it illustrates vividly the mid-twelfth century scene. Many pages of this chiselled record portray the everyday existence of the ordinary people, giving impressions of domestic, agricultural, commercial and sporting life. For example, there is a sketch of a woman cooking food over an open fire, another of a mother playing with her children, and a third



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of a girl having her head deloused by the careful, searching fingers of a friend — an event still to be observed along village streets in modern Cambodia and, for that matter, many other places in Southern Asia. Another little frieze shows a pregnant woman crouching on the floor about to be delivered of her baby by a midwife, whilst another depicts two men enjoying a quiet game of some ancient form of chess. One tableau shows two individuals stewing a giant porker in a pot. They look like Chinese, and but for the pot one might suspect that they were engaged in the enviable task of preparing the tastiest dish in the world, roast sucking pig.

Other panels present the commercial life of the country eight hundred years ago. They show Chinese traders — unmistakably different in their smooth physical appearance from the rougher Kambujan types — arriving with merchandise in a boat, and customers bargaining for goods across a counter in a bazaar, and rustic farmers carrying produce to market in baskets slung on long poles carried on their shoulders, and a woman selling food at an open-air village stall.

Husbandry is represented by bas-reliefs of peasants planting paddy, and of an engaging cow suckling its calf. Huntin', shootin' and fishin' are portrayed by sportsmen attacking wild beasts with poisoned darts, a lone hunter taking aim with a bow and arrow at some unseen game, and mariners on the Great Lake hauling in catches of fish in cast-nets. Stags and deer, storks and wild fowl, eels and turtles run, fly and swim through the pictures, while in one tragic corner a youth is being mauled by a tiger and in another a crocodile is biting an unfortunate bather in two.

Popular sports are not forgotten. There is a vivid picture of a cockfight, and one of men goading wild boars to join in a duel, and another of people dancing a hilarious jig. The work that went to the building of immortal temples is

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recorded. Slaves are shown quarrying stones and baking bricks. Long processions of priests, accompanied by orchestras and troupes of dancing-girls, wend their way to shrines on days of high religious festival. Among them are solemn, bearded Brahmans.

So in scores of charming, intimate scenes the work and play, business and pleasure, family pastimes and national achievements of Jayavarman's subjects perpetually live. It is a brilliant pageant of Khmer society in its varied aspects. And in it are included palace sketches: the king holding council with his ministers, the queens sitting chatting with their ladies, and obsequious courtiers paying homage.

Chou Ta-Kuan, in his report to the Son of Heaven, lifted the curtain a little on court life. First he wrote a description of the capital city, Angkor Thom, recounting with remarkable accuracy the sweeping dimensions of its walls, gates and moat. He observed that the causeways leading across the moat into the metropolis were guarded by nine-headed stone serpents supported by rows of sculptured giants, that each tall gateway was surmounted by five gigantic faces of the Buddha, and that the topmost of these was covered with gilt. He described the grand temple which stood in the city's heart — the many-towered Bayon — and declared that it too gleamed with gold. From it led a golden bridge flanked by two gold lions and faced by eight gold images of the Buddha. The aspects of the lofty Baphuon, the gracious Phimeanakas, the spacious Royal Terrace and other impressive buildings were all sketched. 'I have heard say', said the author, 'that inside the palace are many marvellous places; but the defences are very severe and it is impossible to enter.'

He stated that the King held two audiences each day for the transaction of public business. At the appointed hours officials and citizens wishing to see him sat on the floor before



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a gilded window where he would appear. Music heralded his approach, and then conches blew, and an instant later palace slave-girls raised the curtains of the window 'with their little fingers'. Lo and behold, there sat His Majesty! The crowd clasped their hands in devotion and bowed until their foreheads touched the ground. Only when the conches ceased blowing could they raise their faces again and look upon the king-god.

Chou Ta-Kuan's comments reveal that, in spite of the spread of more democratic notions following the advance of Buddhism, the privileged splendour of the monarchy, the court and the aristocracy persisted. The high princes and officers of state lived in fine mansions with much opulence and countless slaves. When the chief dignitaries travelled through the streets they rode in palanquins, each with a golden litter and four gold-handled parasols. The next in rank had a palanquin with a golden litter but only one gold-handled parasol. The lowest recognized officials sported mere silver-handled parasols.

On feast days the scene was one of glittering grandeur. Lords and ladies arrived on elephant-back or in horse-drawn chariots to witness fireworks displays, dance festivals, wild-boar fights, royal reviews, the ceremony of Washing the Buddhas, and other gorgeous fêtes celebrated in the Grand Plaza. Pavilions decorated with lanterns and flowers, tall masts for launching rockets, and artificial stupas festooned with crackers were erected for these entertainments. A gay holiday crowd filled the streets.

Most glorious of all was the spectacle when the King himself went abroad. If he were making only a short journey in the palace gardens, his escort was modest. He lolled in a golden palanquin borne by four lightly clad, jewelled, jade-white damsels of the royal household. But when he made a

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ceremonial progress through the city, the array was dazzling. Cavalry led the procession, followed by a forest of fluttering standards and pennants, and then by musicians merrily playing. Afterwards cohorts of slave-girls came, with flowers decking their hair and tall, flaming candles held in their hands. Behind them marched more regiments of palace maidens, hundreds upon hundreds of them, carrying gold and silver vessels and other ornamental treasure. The King's Bodyguard followed, once more an exclusively female company – handsome, lithe Amazons bearing shields and lances. Then a cavalcade of goat-carriages and horse-chariots trotted by, all garnished with precious metals. Next many scores of princes, ministers and other courtiers advanced, each one on elephant-back and shaded from the sun by a red silk parasol. Afterwards the King's wives and concubines appeared, some reclining in palanquins and others swaying on howdahs, all seductively and regally adorned. And at their backs came His Majesty himself. He stood erect on a gold-tusked elephant, surrounded by a squadron of horsemen with footmen carrying tall white umbrellas. Proud and disdainful, he wore a golden diadem on his head, a rope of pearls round his neck, and bracelets of gold set with cat's-eyes on his wrists and ankles. In his many-ringed fingers he clasped the golden Sword of State, the symbol of divine majesty. Pundits say that the Sword of State now kept in the Royal Treasury at Phnom Penh, which processes with Kings of Cambodia at their coronations, is the very same weapon.

When the king-god appeared in those processions through ancient Angkor Thom, the populace in the streets prostrated themselves, falling on their knees, touching the ground with their foreheads and remaining bowed until His Majesty had passed.

It was said that the palace staff included nearly five thousand



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girls. Often parents who had an especially beautiful daughter brought her to the court as a gift for the monarch's service. This multitude of sparkling young women was divided into many companies, according to their status as servants, guards, handmaidens or concubines. At the summit of the feminine hierarchy reigned the King's five official wives, the current favourite sharing his private apartments in the heart of the palace and the other quartet distributed in lodgings at each of the four cardinal points of the buildings. There he visited them at his pleasure.

Such was the substance and flavour of Khmer life in times of peace and plenty. When war broke out, many citizens sprang to other forms of activity. These, too, are depicted on the bas-reliefs of the Bayon, some of which celebrate King Jayavarman's military conquest of Champa. There battalions of stocky Khmer soldiers, with features extraordinarily like those of Cambodian peasants today, advance into battle against opposing ranks of Chams, whose rather more Mongolian countenances are easily recognizable. The captains ride on horseback, more senior officers are perched on elephants, and in the centre of his army, on a truly giant tusker, sits the Commander-in-chief, Jayavarman himself, a burly figure with the same massive, strong head as is portrayed in the statue in Phnom Penh.

Some sections of the bas-relief show opposing infantrymen closed in actual combat. Bowmen shoot showers of arrows in the air, spearmen hurl weapons at each other, and guardsmen cross swords and clash shields in hand-to-hand encounters. They trample dead comrades underfoot. It is a scene of carnage. In one place two rival elephants lock curling trunks in a titanic duel. On each beast sits its lordly rider, his elephant-boy crouched before him on the animal's neck and an umbrella-holder standing at his back. The chieftains

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seem to watch with a nonchalant air the hefty tussle between their mounts.

Other parts of the friezes show naval engagements on the Great Lake between boatloads of Khmers and boatloads of Chams. Flags fly on the high-pooped ships, galley-slaves bend to their oars, and armed warriors crowd the decks. At any moment boarding parties might leap into action. In the depths below an audience of astonished fish peer at these strange armadas.

One interesting feature of the bas-reliefs is that many of their vignettes might equally well represent the pastimes of Cambodian people today. Still in town and country farmers carry produce to market in baskets slung on long poles across their shoulders, smiling wenches sell fresh vegetables at little wayside stalls, wild hill-tribes hunt monkeys with bows and arrows, an occasional sportsman falls victim to a crocodile or tiger, and peasants express their happiness in hearty dancing. Still, too, in his palace at Phnom Penh the King gives audience before his courtiers to foreign ambassadors. The centuries which have rolled across the land have made little difference to these customs of a conservative, easy-going race.

Only the battle scenes, where haughty generals ride on elephants whilst foot-soldiers fight with swords and spears, seem to belong to the past and not the present — to be scraps of hoary history. Not that war is now unknown in Cambodia. Recently it, too, recurred like an oft-repeated refrain in the Khmers' long story. But the foreign invaders of this decade came with rifles and tommy-guns, Communist slogans and political commissars to try to destroy the nation's peace and happiness.



## CHAPTER FOUR

# The Ruins of the Khmers

THE Thais sacked Angkor in 1431 and the Khmers abandoned it in 1432. After that the city was lost for a few centuries. As soon as human life retreated from its streets, vegetable life advanced to reclaim the place. The jungle, which had been kept at a respectful distance throughout the capital's active existence, now approached like an encircling army preparing to besiege it. Silently and steadily regiments of trees crept forward, over-running the surrounding plain of neglected rice-fields and stealing into Angkor Thom itself—occupying first this outpost and then that, imprisoning now that building and then this, capturing one stronghold after another until the whole deserted, defenceless garrison of palaces and temples, houses and shops, roads and markets surrendered.

Woodland growth in the sunny, humid tropics is rapid, and before long saplings and shrubs, grasses and wild flowers were invading every corner of the empty city. Timber houses gradually disintegrated, the surfaces of streets disappeared beneath fresh layers of soil, old landmarks crumbled under the assaults of wind and rain, and most signs of mankind's fleeting occupation—which had lasted a mere six hundred years—were blotted from the face of the earth. After a few decades only the stoutest, strongest, grandest brick and stone buildings survived, and even these sank steadily from view beneath the rising tide of forest, just as farmhouses are submerged below the waters of a flood.

The man-borne woods of Dunsinane did not advance more

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inexorably on Macbeth than the jungle of Cambodia marched on Angkor. With the invading army of trees came their camp followers, wild beasts. Where there were once dwellings and streets, now only arbours and glades appeared, and where crowds of people had gathered, naught but herds of animals wandered. Tigers trod where princes had walked, panthers crouched where priests had knelt, parakeets screamed where ladies-in-waiting whispered, and troupes of monkeys leaped through trees where previously multitudes of citizens had strolled through bazaars.

In later generations a few villagers returned to the neighbourhood, to fish in the waters of the Great Lake or plant crops along the banks of the Siem Reap River. As they hunted in the forest they stumbled now and then, to their astonishment, on massive buildings hidden amongst thick-growing, gigantic trees. A group of Buddhist priests, recognizing the sacred nature of the vast edifice of Angkor Vat, settled in huts close by and began once more to mumble prayers in its cloisters. But these were just handfuls of country yokels and unworldly ascetics, ignorant of history and archaeology. They invented fables for themselves about the origin of the strange, huge sanctuaries standing where, they supposed, no man had ever trod before, saying that they had been built by gods.

Occasionally a rumour of the ruins' existence reached the outside world. Stories circulated about a city buried deep in the jungle. But most people treated them with scepticism, like legends which sometimes spread about fabulous, romantic, unreal places such as King Solomon's mines, the Isles of the Blessed, Eldorado and other airy figments of men's ever-optimistic imaginations.

A few French savants treated the reports with cautious respect, and hoped that some day they would gain more substantial evidence about the reputed wonder. Then, one



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morning in 1860, a wandering naturalist, Henri Mouhot, turned a corner along a forest path — and spied ahead, looming through gaps in the green foliage, the grey towers of Angkor Vat. He halted in astonishment, scarcely able to believe his eyes.

He wrote afterwards that coming upon Angkor amid rustic and jungled contemporary Cambodia — the Cambodia of a century ago — was like being suddenly 'transported from barbarism to civilization, from profound darkness to light'.

### II

When Pierre Loti visited Angkor forty years later he travelled by steamboat up the Tonle Sap and across the Great Lake, by sampan through that inland sea to the mouth of the Siem Reap river, and then by ox-cart to the village of Siem Reap and the ruins near by. The journey took him two days and two nights of continuous travel. Until a few years ago that slow progress remained the only means of approach to the rediscovered glories of Cambodia's half-forgotten past.

I flew, as most modern trippers do, in less than an hour by aeroplane from Phnom Penh, and alighted on an airstrip a few miles from Siem Reap. Thence I motored to the village — a pleasant, sun-baked, sleepy cluster of buildings nestling beside a rivulet. Many houses stood along the stream's banks, their vegetable gardens irrigated by water-wheels which lifted cupfuls of the river's content as they slowly revolved, and spilled them on the soil. The place had rustic peace and charm, and its dark-skinned inhabitants seemed content with a somewhat lethargic existence; though occasionally there was a bustle of official activity, since the village was the headquarters of a provincial Governor.

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It was graced, too, by another, surprising kind of dignity. Here and there beside the roadway stood sculptured figures of classic beauty, stone representations of grotesque beasts and serene deities such as might appear in the statued avenues of a cultured city. They were antiquities from the capital of the Khmer Empire founded here a thousand years ago. Silently they returned the gaze of wayfarers, inviting them to cast their glance backwards many centuries to the glory which existed in their youth.

The modern traveller stays in an imposing pile named the Grand Hotel, an example of the barrack-like style of architecture adopted for such establishments early in the twentieth century. It would have struck the ancient Khmers as distinctly unbecoming. Not a luxurious hotel, it is nevertheless comfortable in a modest way, and is conducted by a friendly management. Into it wander not only hordes of tourists but also flocks of denizens of the tropical jungle beyond its windows. On my first evening, for example, when I went to my bathroom for a cooling dip before dinner, I found the bath already occupied by hundreds of small grasshoppers, beetles and other insects attracted from black night out-of-doors to the glow of electric light within.

From the hotel's terrace I spied, a few miles away, the five central, lotus-shaped towers of Angkor Vat rising like a group of rocks above an engulfing sea of forest, and I experienced a preliminary thrill of expectation at the voyage of discovery among buried ruins on which I had embarked.

Angkor is now a place where the jungle, the monuments and wild beasts live in perfect harmony together. There are touches of symmetry about the natural forms of the woodland



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and the architectural forms of the buildings. In the vicinity of the temples stately avenues of trees lead to solemn aisles of sanctuaries, colonnades of sculptured pillars stand within colonnades of mossy trunks, and ceilings of grey stone are topped by loftier vaults of green foliage. The ancient city and fresh forest are combined in a gracious pattern in which stone and timber echo and re-echo each other's motifs. As a result of the painstaking, devoted work of the French archaeologists who restored Angkor, each element has now been put in its place: the destructive invasion of jungle has been checked, the buildings have been saved, and yet all around them the forest is free to maintain its uninhibited growth.

Temples and dells alike are the homes of innumerable birds and beasts. In many crannies among aged, half-crumbled buildings thousands of bats doze upside-down all day, owls blink and shift farther into the shadows as the morning sun peers ever more fiercely upon recessed walls, thrushes flit to and fro in search of food for their young nesting in stony crevices, lizards conduct talkative flirtations on broken, sunlit terraces, and snakes slip noiselessly down grass-grown stairways. These latter creatures also have counterparts in the weathered architecture, for often in its decoration appear the rearing, hooded forms of *nagas*, those five-headed, seven-headed or nine-headed serpents which in Khmer mythology were honoured relatives of the gods.

In moats surrounding city walls buffaloes wallow, kingfishers plunge and sea-eagles swoop to catch their prey. Deer saunter through forest glades, and larger game are also common. It is said that tigers reside in the neighbourhood of Angkor, occasionally padding across flagstones of shrines dedicated to Siva or Vishnu. Panthers abound, as do other, lesser breeds of savage cats; and gossip declares that in the neighbourhood

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of the beautiful, isolated temple of Banteai Srei herds of wild elephant roam.

At dawn bird-song fills with glad music the tangled gardens of jungle surrounding temple courtyards. Wilder and more eerie are the moans of gibbon apes leaping from tree to tree, whilst the chatter and coughs of troupes of monkeys have a friendly, sociable, near-human sound. The call of a jungle-fowl, the cry of a falcon or the screams of air squadrons of parakeets sometimes break the later silence, when the scorching mid-day heat has sapped the energy and stilled the voices of most living creatures.

Through the ruins drift herds of other animals — tourists drawn from the four corners of the earth to this wonder of wonders. Gazing with rapture at the buildings, scanning their guide-books, clicking cameras and dripping perspiration, they are obviously alien intruders, not quite in tune with the prevailing harmony of nature. More congenial to the environment are a different species of human beings, shaven-headed, serene-faced Buddhist monks who stroll in saffron robes through the cloisters in Angkor Vat — a sudden re-incarnation of the past. Their appearance and dress are exactly the same as Chou Ta-Kuan described seven centuries ago.

### IV

Angkor first became the site of Kambuja's capital about the year 800, when King Jayavarman II founded a city there. For the next few hundred years successive kings built a series of cities in the vicinity, most of them more or less on the spot where Angkor Thom now stands. Others were short distances away. Occasionally a usurper established a capital farther afield, and many rulers raised fine temples in country towns or villages remote from the seat of government. For



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hundreds of miles around Angkor the ruins of these edifices litter the forest. There are about four hundred and fifty Khmer monuments in modern Cambodia alone, and many others in Laos, Thailand and Vietnam. Several of the distant ones are magnificent masterpieces, but this book is not concerned with them. It touches only on the monumental remains at Angkor itself.

I shall not attempt a detailed account of the evolution of Khmer architecture as it is revealed in the succession of Angkor's significant buildings from the ninth to the thirteenth centuries. Even if I had sufficient space, I have insufficient knowledge for that. Readers who wish to gain acquaintance with the exact processes by which single-tower temples developed into many-towered temples, shrines on ground level were elevated into shrines on the tops of terraced pyramids, and separate sanctuaries in a group became united by vaulted corridors, as well as with all the other changes of form which led, step by step, to the grand climax at Angkor Vat, must turn to the weightier, more knowledgeable tomes of scholars. There are plenty of them, especially for those 'qui lisent facilement le Français'.

I shall draw only a slight sketch of the evolution. It began centuries before the Khmers settled at Angkor at all, in the primitive religious buildings of the ancient state called Funan. Brick and stone were scarcely ever used by the Khmers for other than places of worship. In the latter years of the Empire they were employed also for constructing city walls, gateways and causeways, but rarely at any time were they used in domestic architecture. Even the largest palaces were built of wood, partly perhaps because of shortage of other handy material, but probably also because Khmer builders never discovered the secret of the true arch. When necessary they had to resort to the false arch, or corbelling,

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to cover an entrance or vault a chamber; and this method can enclose only small spaces. It was useless for making ceilings for large audience chambers, reception-rooms and assembly halls. So to the end of the Empire all such buildings, as well as private residences, were made of timber.

Brick and stone could be used for sacred buildings because these never contained large apartments. Unlike Christian churches, Moslem mosques and some Buddhist pagodas, they were not intended to accommodate human congregations, but only to shelter the images of gods. The crowd of worshippers gathered outside in open courtyards or wooden pavilions. So the actual sanctuaries were small, though eventually a number of them grouped together in one temple, with connecting corridors and surrounding quadrangles, spread over a wide area.

Originally, in Funan, these dwellings for Hindu or Buddhist idols were also built almost wholly of timber, occasionally with brick foundations and porches and stone slabs for framing doors. At some portentous moment bricks were manufactured in sufficient quantity to give the whole edifice greater permanence, whilst stone became increasingly used for the posts and lintels of doors. A few of these shrines remain sufficiently intact to tell their story. They were simple structures consisting of a single, square, high-roofed tower with a porched entrance into a cramped, dark chamber where the statue of the god lived. The whole conception was borrowed from a contemporary Indian style, and its decoration was slight. The first of those solitary little towers was the embryo from which grew gradually all the magnificent achievements of later generations.

Throughout the Chenla period temples continued to be built mostly of brick with stone embellishments, though occasionally an entirely stone structure appeared. This was



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probably because the pre-Angkor capitals and other important centres of population were sited in river valleys, away from hills where stone could be procured. Only when the seat of government moved to Angkor, near the rocky height of Phnom Kulen, did large quantities of sandstone and laterite become accessible. After that, in the early tenth century, began the construction of great all-stone monuments.

The remains of several dozen Chenla sanctuaries survive in various parts of Indo-China. Gradually the tower-temples grew larger and taller, and their decoration became finer. It was then that one of the most characteristic and splendid features of Khmer architectural adornment developed fully, like a beautiful flower bursting from a plain bud. This was the temple door.

As I have written, the more durable sanctuaries were almost always built of brick with stone as an accessory. In particular the frames and sills of doorways, with colonnettes flanking and lintels capping them, were formed of laterite or sandstone. The latter material was easily cut, and yet so firm that carvings on it remained sharp for centuries after chisels first shaped them. In Chenla times the decoration of the doors became increasingly magnificent. The true doorway stood in the centre of one side of a rectangular tower, giving access to the sanctuary within, whilst on each of the other three sides 'false' doors were constructed, exact copies of the original itself. The stone posts, colonnettes and lintels of all four were carved with tasteful designs of flowers, foliage, beasts and human figures. But whereas the door of the entrance was made of wood hung on hinges (so that it could open and shut), and has everywhere rotted away long ago, the false doors were stone replicas which still survive. They reveal that the portal was carved almost as elaborately as its frame. These doorways are large in relation to the size of the whole tower, and form a

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noble feature in rich contrast to their background of more or less plain brick wall.

Another important step in the evolution of architectural forms was taken during the Chenla period. Hitherto each temple was a single tower, called a '*prasat*', standing in isolation. Now three or more *prasats* were occasionally built in close proximity to compose a group. The central sanctuary would probably house the principal god, whilst the others were the lodgings of attendant divinities.

Then came a further development. Until that moment all the edifices had been built on ground level, raised above the rough soil by only a shallow brick or stone foundation. Sometime in those Chenla centuries an architect had the notion to elevate his temple-tower on a terrace several feet above the earth, thus giving it greater importance and dignity. This was the beginning of the later 'pyramid' temple, in which the central sanctuary stood at the summit of a series of superimposed, receding terraces like an artificial hill. There was a religious reason for this design. The Hindu gods were supposed to live on top of a mountain, Mount Meru. The architects therefore conceived the idea of making these earthly homes of the gods' images like the divine abode on Mount Meru. The steep-sided pyramid represented that sacred height, with the central shrine on its summit. Actually Mount Meru was reputed to have five peaks, and in later temples (as in Angkor Vat itself) these were portrayed by five towers clustered on the sanctuary's highest terrace.

### v

Jayavarman built two cities in the neighbourhood, the first before he founded his mountain fortress farther north on Phnom Kulen, and the other after he returned to the plains.



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The site of the earlier one is uncertain; the second was at a place now called Roluos, a few miles south-east of Angkor Thom. Named Hariharalaya in Jayavarman's day, it was the more important and remained the capital during the next few reigns.

The oldest surviving, or partially surviving, temple in the Angkor region is called Ak Yom. Standing half buried in jungle undergrowth several miles west of Angkor Thom, it perhaps marks the situation of Jayavarman's earlier city. Although comparatively little of the building remains, it is worth a visit because of this unique historical association. A badly ruined central tower and bits and pieces of smaller towers on the top platform of a three-tiered pyramid are constructed mostly of brick, with some stone features. There are traces of carved figures on the walls, fragments of colonnettes are still in place, and over one doorway scraps of chipped floral sculpture persist. Parts of broken pilasters, a basin for holy water, and the pediment of a statue with two amputated feet still fixed on it lie tumbled among wild bushes. Inscriptions relate that an earlier shrine stood here, but the present building was undoubtedly made during Jayavarman's rule. It is one of the earliest known pyramid temples.

Remains of one or two other contemporary buildings stand in the neighbourhood, but the best preserved early temples are a group of three situated at Roluos, or Hariharalaya. This was the site of Jayavarman's last city, and remained the capital during the reigns of three successors. No recognizable relic of Jayavarman's own buildings there survive. Since he had by then espoused the cult of the Devaraja, he must have built a sanctuary to house his royal lingam; but no heap of brick or stone yet discovered can reasonably be supposed to have sheltered this symbol of his divinity, and none is now

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likely to be found. Nor is there any building which can be attributed to his son and immediate successor, the elephant-hunting Jayavarman III.

The three remaining sanctuaries are named Preah Ko, Bakong and Loley, and were completed in the years 879, 881 and 893 respectively. The first two were finished during the reign of Jayavarman III's heir, Indravarman I, and the third early in that of the next king, the important and controversial Yasovarman I.

I remember my first visit to Roluos, one sunny February day. Beside the path leading to the temples appeared structures strangely like miniature models of the ruins—slim columns of earth rising several feet high, each standing in isolation like a solitary, crumbling tower. They were the hill-homes of termite ants, built painstakingly by hordes of these industrious insects, just as the brick and stone Khmer *prasats* had been raised laboriously by vast gangs of human slaves. Groups of pied minahs quarrelled noisily in the temple precincts, herons stabbed their prey in a near-by pond, and storks stood gravely in surrounding trees. One pair of painted storks had made their nest on the crown of a tower at Loley, where the birds perched statuesquely on the ancient architecture like heraldic decorations.

The three temples of Preah Ko, Bakong and Loley are more imposing in size and style than any earlier Khmer buildings. Preah Ko is a cluster of six towers arranged in two close rows on a low platform; Bakong is a pyramid temple where the central tower stands on the summit of a series of successively receding terraces, with other towers spaced round; and Loley is a group of four platform towers. The largest of the trio, Bakong, was especially sacred, for it housed the royal lingam of its author, King Indravarman I. Though its original central *prasat* has disappeared and the



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present one is a later substitute, the unprecedented grandeur of the whole building's pyramid form makes it, as Lawrence Palmer Briggs writes in *The Ancient Khmer Empire*, 'one of the great landmarks of Khmer architectural history. It marked the beginning of the first period of Classical Khmer architecture. Compared with the later great monuments of that architecture, like Angkor Vat, the Bayon, or Banteai Chmar, the Bakong is insignificant enough; but compared with anything which had preceded it, it was immense.'

All three temples were built mostly of brick, with stone as an accessory for doorways, niches and a few other features. Some of their details are very beautiful indeed. The carving of foliage on the lintels is particularly exquisite. These late-ninth-century decorated stone columns and panels are extraordinarily reminiscent in craftsmanship and spirit of some of the finest carvings in Gothic cathedrals in Europe chiselled a few generations later. They make 'some of the colonnettes of this epoch', in the opinion of Gilberte de Coral Remusat, 'the most beautiful of all Khmer art'.

The sculpture of human figures as decoration in ecclesiastical architecture now began to develop. Some of the most charming details of Preah Ko and Loley are small canopied niches flanking the elaborate doors and false doors, each sheltering a statue of a guardian spirit. These figures stood sentinel for the gods within the towers, their sex depending on that of the holy one concerned. The male figures are either *devas*, who are divinities, or *asuras*, who are demons; whilst the females are *devatas* or goddesses, and *apsaras* or heavenly dancers.

Other sculptured figures which appeared in the Roluos group, either for the first time or else in early manifestations, were crouching lions, the reclining bull Nandi (who was Siva's favourite mount), and the famous Naga snake. This

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serpent, which could assume human form when it wished, made its debut in an elementary form in a balustrade at Bakong, where its body lies along the ground and its rearing neck and seven separate heads are rather crude. The reptile was to pass through a long, changeful architectural evolution before it ultimately emerged, three centuries later, as the magnificent eleven-headed creature held in the arms of scores of giants and demons along either side of the causeways entering Angkor Thom.

Other innovations appeared in the Roluos group of buildings, such as the *gopura* or arched gateway leading to the temple precincts, a series of concentric enclosures surrounding spaciouly the central group of towers, and libraries for the safe keeping of sacred manuscripts. The end of the ninth century was a time of experiment in Khmer architecture, exciting and marvellously pregnant.

Two of the monuments — Bakong and Loley — are still haunts of monks. Beside each stands a Buddhist temple in a modern style of taste, and near by are the humble wood-and-attap dormitories of shaven-headed, yellow-robed Hinayanist priests. These gentle-mannered men move quietly amongst the ancient ruins, surrounding them still with an aura of worship.

### VI

To describe the many noble buildings at Angkor is not my purpose. They are too numerous; so, whilst mentioning some of the more important in passing, I shall dwell at length on only a few of the greatest.

At the end of the ninth century Yasovarman I moved his capital from the Roluos neighbourhood to that of Angkor proper, and after that most of the magnificent temples of the



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locality congregated there. They were distributed over a fairly wide area, for the successive cities of successive kings were large. Today they therefore appear isolated monuments scattered amongst jungle trees; but dozens of them are nevertheless within easy distance of each other.

The oldest of them is Bakheng, the centre of Yasovarman's city, the home of his lingam during his life and his tomb after his death. It stands on a hill just outside the south gate of Angkor Thom, a pyramid temple with steep flights of steps guarded by squatting lions. The next important sanctuary, chronologically, is Prasat Kravan, an unusual row of five brick towers arranged side by side, with bold bas-relief portraits of Vishnu and his consort Lakshmi on the inner walls of its central shrine. Then came two very large pyramid temples, East Mebon and Pre Rup, each with five towers grouped on its topmost platform. They are imposing piles, and express the Khmers' growing aspiration for size; but, though some of their detail is fine, they are ponderous and rather uninspired. The last of the great monuments in plastered brick, they mark the end of an epoch in the technique of Khmer building.

Many smaller sanctuaries were raised during the first half of the tenth century; but the next really noteworthy temple is Banteai Srei. It is an unforgettably beautiful work of art.

Banteai Srei stands in solitude about twenty miles from Angkor. The dirt road leading to it is impassable in the rainy season, but at other times it is negotiable by jeep. As you drive across a rough country track you pass through several modern Cambodian hamlets where grass huts raised on stilts stand amidst untidy orchards and paddy-fields. Perpetual sunshine has tanned the peasants to a dark shade of brown. Most men work bare above the waist on their land, and some women, too, favour this semi-nudity. The children

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are stark naked. This rustic simplicity is reminiscent of ancient days, when Banteai Srei was a flourishing, much frequented place of worship.

Red jungle-fowl strut occasionally beside the road, flaunting their handsome gold-and-scarlet plumage. Crow-pheasants are a frequent sight, the splashes of brilliant colour on their wings seeming like flying torches as they dart through the undergrowth. Grotesque hornbills, screaming parakeets, racket-tailed drongos and other native birds add touches of tropical nature to the scene, emphasizing the shrine's jungly remoteness.

When I first visited the temple an escort of many butterflies met me as I stepped from my jeep, fluttering round me like a multi-coloured mist as I entered the sacred precincts. A party of gibbon apes offered a noisier welcome. They gambolled in a group of trees overlooking the ruins, running on all fours along the branches and occasionally leaping with violent shakings of foliage from tree to tree. Of a sudden they started a hullabaloo. First one ape raised a cry like a series of swift explosions of a small motor cycle starting into motion, calling 'Poop-poop-poop-poop-poop' in a monotonous and yet sonorous and pleasant tone which continued for several minutes; then this soloist was joined by the choir of his fellows, who engaged in a frenzied medley of diverse cries, moaning, wailing, whooping and caterwauling all at once. By artful modulations in their voices the volume of their odd music rose and fell like the alternate sighing and roaring of a gale of wind in the tree-tops. It was a weirdly attractive concert.

The temple had an air of remoteness from the human world, with the sort of solitude which is peopled only by wild animals. When I came to its moat a small kingfisher clothed in royal-blue and blood-red plumage sat on a twig, hopefully



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eyeing the depths below. Occasionally a fish rose and the bird dived, breaking with a splash the profound silence which had succeeded the monkeys' serenade. Black-headed, scarlet-bodied and tinsel-winged dragonflies skimmed above the water, also hunting their prey.

Banteai Srei, meaning 'Citadel of the Women', was completed and dedicated in the year 968. Owing to a misreading of certain inscriptions, it was at one time considered a product of the fourteenth century, and so judged to be the last of the great buildings in the Classical Khmer style. A later correction established that it was in fact the first of these — the tentative introduction, not the refined finish to beautiful new forms in architecture. Coming into being in a peaceful period of Khmer history, when the court was filled with scholars and artists as well as statesmen and ecclesiastics — a generation of men of fine taste and creative culture — the temple's serene grace is an admirable expression of the age.

It marked both a revolution in building and a transition in architecture. In its construction bricks play comparatively little part, the sanctuaries and their attendant buildings being raised mostly of stone. Some of their features recall conservatively the past, but in general they reach forward to the future, experimenting with fresh ideas. The lofty mass of a pyramid temple is absent here, for the design is quite different. Instead of terraces being piled on top of one another, with towers raised on each terrace, giving the whole edifice a formidable and concentrated aspect, the buildings at Banteai Srei are distributed on ground level with a certain spaciousness and lightness. Three shrines stand side by side on a low platform in the middle of a quadrangle, a pair of libraries flank them a short distance away, and walls with fine gateways enclose this inner group. Beyond them stood other elaborately adorned monastic buildings, and these were

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surrounded by a broad moat. Probably a palisade formed the outer boundary of the temple proper, pierced by a richly fashioned gateway; and from that entrance an avenue led away past subordinate buildings to a second grand gateway. Some of these numerous buildings have disappeared, but the most important remain.

Especially beautiful are the central shrines and libraries. Decorated all over with fine carvings, they are as ornate as a cluster of jewels. Their magnificence is echoed on arches and other decorative features elsewhere, and the total effect is of a group of pavilions built to house fabulous treasure. No Hindu temple in India is more elaborately sculptured, and the work here has special exquisiteness because the sanctuaries are small. Whether in keeping with the place's name, Citadel of the Women, or by coincidence, its style has a quality of femininity. Though the total size of the ensemble is considerable, each individual piece is dainty and even petite. The towers of the sanctuaries do not rise more than twenty feet from the ground, and the other buildings are in keeping with this dwarfishness. The place is more like a quarter-size model of a temple than an actual temple. Infinite pains were taken about its adornment, to the point of fastidiousness and preciousness.

Some architectural details hark back to the past. Certain colonnettes, for example, reproduce earlier styles, and the lintels in places copy the fashion of the Roluos monuments. Elsewhere surprising and pleasing innovations appear. One of the most arresting is the device of a trio of frontons imposed over some doorways. The walls are low, with doors reaching scarcely four feet high; but the frontons rise loftily above, one upon the other and one behind the other in a series of receding planes, with a massiveness which would give the building a top-heavy effect were it not for the almost lacy



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lightness of their intricately decorated borders carved with foliage, flowers and mythological animals.

The tympana in their centres introduced another novelty, being sculptured not with formalized floral designs, but with informal, lively representations of human and divine beings. One of the shrines was dedicated to Vishnu, so the tympana on the library near it portray episodes from the legend of that god. Another shrine was built for the worship of Siva, and the tympana on its neighbouring library are adorned with scenes in his sacred story. Other tympana relate incidents from the great Indian epic, the *Mahabharata*. In all these tableaux crowds of gods and mortals re-enact famous events with eternal gusto, thanks to the vivid skill of the craftsmen who gave them birth.

In niches beside the sanctuary doors stand sculptured figures of guardian spirits. Conforming to the smallness of the buildings, they are usually more diminutive than those of earlier and later periods, measuring only two feet high. But they are exquisitely formed, and retain often a sharpness as if they had been cut yesterday. The bodies of the female divinities have more voluptuous curves than appear elsewhere in Khmer art, and their faces possess beguiling sweetness.

At the head of each short flight of steps to the platform of the central shrines kneel completely rounded statues of half-human figures with grotesque heads of monkeys, parrots and wild-cats. These sentinels are engaging, but unfortunately never appeared again in later Khmer buildings. They are fitting companions to the apes, birds and feline forest creatures who are now the temple's most frequent visitors.

So Banteai Srei combines an enchanting mixture of the old and the new. Abandoning the contemporary taste for pyramid temples, its buildings were dispersed over the

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ground in a well-planned system of shrines, libraries, courtyards, galleries and moat. It was to be a combination, later, of this spacious design with the traditional pyramid temple as its apex that would ultimately produce the finest of Khmer creations.

### VII

Banteai Srei was founded in the last year of Rajendrarvarman II's reign and dedicated in the first year of the rule of Jayavarman V. Jayavarman afterwards started to build in his capital, twenty miles away, two other important temples. Both were incomplete at his death and were finished in the rather later reign of the formidable warrior and builder, Suryavarman I, who conquered the kingdom in the early years of the eleventh century.

These buildings were Takeo and the Phimeanakas. Both are pyramid temples, landmarks in the history of Khmer architecture because they were the first of the type constructed wholly of sandstone; and each has further innovations which carry Khmer architectural design forward towards its climax of beauty and power.

The Phimeanakas is the most debated monument in Angkor. Popular legend, as retailed by the much later Chinese chronicler Chou Ta-Kuan, said that it was a palace, and that the king spent the first watch of every night in its high central chamber in company with the spirit of the supreme Naga, the mysterious serpent-owner of all the Khmer lands. It was further alleged that at these nightly tête-à-têtes the ghostly visitor materialized in the form of an enchanting young woman. Rumour said that if the king missed a rendezvous with her, the consequence would be famine, pestilence or military defeat for his people soon afterwards;



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and that if she failed to appear, it was a sign that the hour of his death approached.

It seems a pity to disbelieve this pleasing tale, to shatter such a romantic illusion. But the Phimeanakas was never a palace. Suryavarman's and his successors' royal residences were all built of wood. The Phimeanakas was a temple where the king went to worship a being more sublime and unattainable even than a serpent princess.

One of Suryavarman's achievements was the town-planning of the capital's civic centre on the grand scale of which splendid, though ruined traces remain today. Probably he built a new supreme temple at his city's heart, on the site of the present Bayon; but all sign of it has since disappeared. Near by stood the recently completed Phimeanakas, and beside it Suryavarman now constructed the Royal Enclosure with the official palace in front, the domestic quarters of the household at the rear, and pavilioned gardens surrounded by a magnificent laterite wall within a broad moat. The broken remains of one of Suryavarman's gateways into the grounds show that it was a masterpiece of ornamental as well as functional architecture. No part of the actual palace building survives, but when I last passed its site workmen were digging from its foundations fragments of Sung and Ming porcelain imported, no doubt, from China during the next few generations for the use of the Khmer kings.

In front of the Royal Enclosure Suryavarman laid out the first Grand Plaza. Some of its notable present-day splendours, like the Elephant Terrace and the Terrace of the Leper King, were later additions; but the general conception of this spacious and dignified square, and several of its buildings, were Suryavarman's work. The stately North and South Kleangs and the twelve Towers of the Cord-Dancers were his creations. Their respective functions are matters of

conjecture. Possibly the Kleangs provided accommodation for foreign missions and provincial viceroys when they came to town; and Chou Ta-Kuan wrote that the Towers of the Cord-Dancers played a part in a strange ordeal to which litigants were exposed called 'The Judgment of Heaven'. According to him, when two persons were in dispute at law, each was seated on top of a tower. After a few days one of them would develop suspicious symptoms — carbuncles, ulcers, fever or something of the kind. He was promptly judged the guilty party and lost his case. Some more recent authorities have suggested that the towers were really vantage points from which official personages could watch the processions, sports, wild-boar fights and other ceremonies which were held in the Grand Plaza.

Suryavarman made many splendid additions to temples at a distance from the capital, but no other surviving building in Angkor was his product. We know, however, that he beautified the city with large numbers of pools, basins and other ornamental waters which compelled the admiration of foreign visitors. Their stone channels have been brought to light by excavations in the last quarter-century. They were not merely decorative, but useful as well. Probably Sir Osbert Sitwell's intriguing notion in his book *Escape with Me* that they were contrived to attract multitudes of kingfishers, so that the export trade in kingfishers' plumes for the adornment of costumes in the Imperial Court of China could thrive, is far-fetched. The pools' purposes were more prosaic. For example, in many of them the population had their frequent baths (commented upon so critically by Chou Ta-Kuan), just as to this day numerous citizens of Djakarta in Java perform their ablutions publicly in the canals flowing through the centre of the city.

Suryavarman also conceived and built the immense reser-



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voir just outside Angkor Thom called the West Baray. Five miles long and more than a mile wide, it was perhaps intended partly for supplying the capital with water during the dry season, but chiefly for irrigating the surrounding agricultural plain. Much of the vast basin is now silted up, but a large area is still a beautiful lake, a resort of cormorants, grebes and many kinds of wildfowl.

The next memorable temple in the great dynasty of Khmer buildings which still survive at Angkor is the Baphuon. Raised by Suryavarman's successor, Udayadityavarman II, it had at the time unprecedented size and splendour, and is still second only to the Bayon in importance inside the city walls. Contemporary inscriptions describe it as 'a gold temple on a gold mountain'; Chou Ta-Kuan wrote two hundred years later that its central tower was made of copper; and some modern scholars have suggested that perhaps this pinnacle was carved of gilded wood. No one can tell now, for it has disappeared.

Indeed, the Baphuon is unfortunately the least well preserved of Angkor's major monuments. Its over-eager author, ambitious to make his new temple dominate the whole capital, first raised an artificial hill and then placed the building on its top. Probably the earth was insufficiently packed, or for some other reason this unnatural eminence began in time to shift its ground. The result was a weakening of the Baphuon's foundations, and eventually the temple slipped, cracked and collapsed. Today only the three steep, massive terraces of its pyramid form, with some of their attendant superstructures, remain. The moat which surrounded it, and most of its galleries and towers have gone; so the edifice has a truncated look, like a headless, limbless torso.

Even so, enough remains to show that it was not only by far the largest temple yet built by the Khmers, but also one

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of the choicest in decoration. It marked a long stride forward in the Khmers' architectural achievement. Amongst other innovations, it invented the bas-relief as a means of telling religious tales on sacred walls. These sculptures in the Baphuon mostly illustrate episodes in the famous Hindu classics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. They are small, individual panels, but are carved with a superb craftsmanship which was never excelled before or afterwards. The Baphuon is a significant milestone on the road of progress towards Angkor Vat.

Udayadityavarman's reign was plagued by political troubles, as were those of his immediate successors. Several buildings which he and they may have erected in the capital were probably soon destroyed; but the remains of one, Preah Pulilay, show with what a sure touch for gracious design Khmer builders were now endowed. Its sanctuaries are almost completely shattered, but a beautiful fragment of decorative terrace still stands in a wild garden of jungle.

Then, in 1113, the great conqueror, ruler and builder, Suryavarman II, came to the throne. During the next few decades he founded noble temples in various parts of the Empire, and amongst them were three inside the confines of his capital. They are Preah Pithu, close to the North Kleang, and Chansay Tevoda and Thommanon near the Gate of Victory. None of them is well preserved, and none was a major effort; but their ruins are distinguished by the confident style and beautiful detail of which the Khmers were established masters on the eve of their creation of Angkor Vat. In particular I commend to a visitor, who stays long enough in Siem Reap to enjoy the minor works of Angkor, the almost twin temples of Chansay Tevoda and Thommanon. He will find them small shrines of singular charm,



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in which the graceful (though heavy-footed) *apsaras*, or heavenly dancers, who enliven the walls of Angkor Vat made perhaps their first appearance in the vicinity.

Two sanctuaries at a short distance from the capital were more direct forerunners of Angkor Vat. The first, Beng Mealear, was built rather earlier, about the same time as Preah Pulilay; but the second, Banteai Samre, was raised in Suryavarman's reign. Each now stands in dense, uninhabited forest, Beng Mealear several miles away in a badly ruined state, and Banteai Samre beside the East Baray, still remarkably well preserved. Both are groups of numerous buildings constructed on ground level, with no suggestion of a pyramid form. In fact no edifice of that lofty type was built at Angkor between the Baphuon and Angkor Vat, almost a century later. Yet Beng Mealear and Banteai Samre are in many characteristics of mass, construction and decoration premonitions of Angkor Vat. Their long stone-vaulted galleries, for example, surrounding quadrangles with solid wall on one side and open arcades on the other, were trials for one of the later temple's most triumphant features; and the high tower of the central sanctuary at Banteai Samre was perhaps the last step of Khmer architecture before it attained the summit of its endeavour.

The great moment had arrived.

### VIII

Angkor Vat is the supreme masterpiece of Khmer art. Built in the first half of the twelfth century, it is an Asian contemporary of Notre Dame de Paris and Chartres Cathedral in France, and of Ely and Lincoln Cathedrals in England. But in spaciousness and splendour it is more ambitious than any of these. Indeed, with the possible exception of Banteai

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Chmar in Cambodia, it is said to be the largest religious building ever constructed by man.

One can best gain an impression of its size and plan by viewing it from the air. Circling over it in an aeroplane, one sees a vast clearing in the jungle completely filled with its courts and buildings. A broad moat filled with water encloses it. A stone causeway crosses this to reach the main entrance, an imposing gateway in a high, galleried wall built immediately within the moat and surrounding the whole area of the temple. Inside the wall is a vast outer courtyard, then a low wall and a smaller inner enclosure, and finally the group of inmost buildings composing the sanctuary itself.

The measurements of the place are impressive. Each of the four sides of the moat, which forms an almost exact square, is about a mile in length. The outer and inner enclosures are huge open spaces to accommodate congregations of many thousands of people. Even the walls of the central sanctuary measure more than half a mile in circumference, and the pile is massive not only in length and width, but also in height. A pyramid temple, it climbs in three successive stages to its central cluster of five towers, the topmost of them rising two hundred and fifteen feet above the surrounding forest. Each tower is crowned with a soaring pinnacle shaped like a bursting lotus bud. That was the vision which took Henri Mouhot's breath away when he came upon it suddenly amongst the jungle trees.

Fortunately Angkor Vat is not only the finest but also one of the best-preserved of Khmer monuments. It was built with superb, enduring strength. In contrast to the small, exquisite architecture of Banteai Srei, with its touch of femininity, this has large, handsome, masculine grace. It combines a glorious mixture of qualities. It sprawls spaciously, and yet its overall proportions are perfect; there is a sug-



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gestion of austerity about its simple, massive design, but the details of its decoration are in places riotously lovely; and the contrast between its wide, smooth, grassy enclosures and its acres of sculptured masonry is almost theatrical. The galleries, stairways, libraries and shrines in its courtyards are palatial, and they stand solidly. No building on earth seems more sure of itself.

This is natural in the grand climax of several centuries of building by a race of architectural geniuses. Before its creation every Khmer temple was in a sense a tentative experiment, and afterwards every one was a step towards decay. Many of these other monuments are wonderful, but they all have a degree of imperfection. Angkor Vat is the ultimate expression of a great civilization. It is the end of a long architectural evolution — the ideal at which all its predecessors were groping. The process started with the small brick single-tower temples of ancient Funan, more than a thousand years earlier. It took a long step forward when anonymous builders in Chenla arranged a few of these *prasats* side by side, and then mounted them on a platform. Another advance occurred when the solitary platform became a succession of terraces. By the time that Jayavarman II founded the independent kingdom of Kambuja and brought its capital to the neighbourhood of Angkor, this pyramid temple was beginning to grow quite large. He built the first of them there at Ak Yom, more than three centuries before Angkor Vat was conceived. His grandson raised a more imposing example at Bakong in the Roluos group of shrines. After that the developing skill and imagination of builders kept improving the conception, the edifices spreading outwards as well as upwards, constantly growing in grandeur. In Angkor the evolution can be traced through a succession of buildings — Phnom Bakheng, East Mebon, Pre Rup, Banteai Srei,

Takeo, Phimeanakas, the Baphuon, Preah Pulilay, Banteai Samre and other famous sanctuaries. Parallel with the evolution of the series of terraces and courts was the development through generations of other important features, such as the *gopuras*, the galleries, the libraries and the groups of towers. Decoration, too, passed through a progressive transformation on doorways, walls, balustrades and turrets. These processes culminated at Angkor Vat, which itself showed some striking novel features. Its vaulted staircases climbing from terrace to terrace, and its hugely enlarged central tower rising high above its four companions on the summit, appear in Khmer construction for the first time.

The temple's detailed decoration is subordinate always to the simple but grand design of the building as a whole; yet this decoration is everywhere, adorning the stone from its lowest foundation to its loftiest pinnacle. On many walls and pillars its patterns are carved unobtrusively, in shallow etched lines which are scarcely noticeable until you approach them close. In other places it seeks deliberately and exuberantly to draw attention to itself. Where the carving has been sheltered from wind and rain it still has fine sharpness and delicacy, but elsewhere the hand of time has lain more harshly upon it.

Sculpture of human figures in the round is poorly represented at Angkor Vat. If many such statues originally existed, they have disappeared. The temple's greatest sculptural treasure is its bas-reliefs. In particular the vast frieze of pictorial carvings covering the walls of the gallery round the sanctuary's lowest terrace is unique. Reaching about eight feet high, it stretches continuously for more than half a mile, like an immense tapestry wrought in stone. Its subjects are mostly incidents from Indian epics and holy books, the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* and others. They portray scenes from the lives of the great god Rama and his wife



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Sita, who was kidnapped by the demon Ravana and transported to the island of Lanka; and of the divine youth Krishna flirting with milkmaids beside the Jumna river; and of other sacred characters; and they are eloquent of the abiding influence which Indian religion and culture exerted on Khmer thought and belief. But amongst the heroes of ancient Indian legend appear, here and there, contemporary Kambujan heroes. The figure of Suryavarman II, the temple's creator, intrudes in two places, surrounded by groups of his soldiers. His battles against the valiant Chams are pictured side by side with the battles of Rama against the devilish Ravana. All these great bas-reliefs are protected by their gallery roof; their freshness is well preserved, and their artistry is very fine.

Elsewhere on the buildings a great wealth of similar mural decoration abounds. Collectively it amounts to almost as extensive a display, but it is distributed in countless separate panels on many different architectural vantage points. There are, for instance, multitudes of demons and monkeys disporting amongst flowers on the many-tiered stages of the central towers, representing the war for the recapture of Sita, for Rama's conquering army was a host of monkeys.

Most famous of all are hundreds of figures of *devatas* and *apsaras* scattered singly, in pairs, or in small groups in shallow niches along the walls. These divine damsels have serene faces with slanting eyes and smiling lips; their coiffures are elaborate and diverse; and they wear jewelled ear-rings, necklaces, bangles and anklets. Their bodies are naked above the waist and their long skirts seem to be of fine material. But their perfection of form is marred by their feet, which appear — seemingly because of the shallowness of the sculpture — in profile instead of pointing forwards. This contortion gives them a clumsiness out of keeping with the rest of their

grace. It is an extraordinary example of brilliantly talented craftsmen — which the Khmer sculptors undoubtedly were — suddenly failing to overcome a particular technical problem and 'putting their foot in it' (as well as the feet of the *devatas*) rather badly.

Other sculptured figures contrast strangely with these seductive females. They are ascetic, bearded holy men, devout Brahmans squatting cross-legged in obscure corners of the temple's cloisters in attitudes of contemplation or prayer. In the open courtyards statues of animals enliven the scene. Lions stand on guard beside the staircases. It is said that three hundred of them existed in the original building. Gigantic *nagas* form balustrades along the causeways, and multitudes of monkeys — more cohorts of Rama's army — leap on lintels above the doors. Almost everywhere decoration in some form exists. Occasionally there are traces of painting on stone vaults, like murals in medieval cathedrals; but whether the pigment is as aged as the temple is questionable.

In some places the carvings are unfinished. Workmen suddenly ceased their labour before it was done. That is not uncommon on Khmer buildings, as if the creators of these great monuments often bit off more than they could chew, set themselves tasks rather more colossal than even they could achieve — or perhaps suddenly became impatient to start a fresh, finer work. Thus on the back wall of the middle terrace at Angkor Vat several figures of *devatas* are only tentatively traced, their forms sketched lightly in engraved outline on otherwise unchipped stone. They look like half-materialized ghosts. Others are in various stages of completion: here a face is fully sculptured on an unfinished body, there the body is riper, but its adornment of skirt and jewellery is only faintly suggested. The reason for this careless workmanship remains an eternal mystery.



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During the last few decades there have been arguments amongst scholars about the original purpose of this magnificent place. Doubts were raised partly because of its situation outside the old capital, a mile beyond the walls. Some thought that it was a king's palace, others that it housed a royal harem, and yet others that it was a temple of unusual dedication. Now the generally accepted view is that it was the mausoleum of Suryavarman II, where his mortal remains were interred and his memory enshrined. Mostly it was built during his reign, though probably the finishing touches were put to it after his death in 1150.

The interesting circumstance that it was built outside the city walls would not be inconsistent with Suryavarman's unorthodoxy in religious as well as some other matters. He was a reforming type of Vishnuite. In any case it is well that the temple stands alone. Angkor Vat is completely self-sufficient; its glory is perfect in solitude. In recent generations a small group of newer buildings have been tucked into one corner of the precincts—a few modest, yellow-roofed dwellings of a community of Buddhist monks in the outer enclosure, surrounded by fruit trees beside a lotus pond. But their simple structures scarcely seem an intrusion, and they add a touch of continuing reverence to the scene. The saffron-robed priests wander silently like flecks of sunshine through the temple's shadowy galleries.

Other worshippers also come now and then to prostrate themselves in the hallowed cloisters. In one aisle many images of the Buddha have been collected, and often they bear evidence of recent visits by villagers from Siem Reap. Before one burns a stick of incense, at the feet of another lies a bunch of fresh flowers, and round the neck of a third hangs, like a garland, a gaily-coloured scarf. Sometimes an actual worshipper is there, kneeling on the stone floor with hands

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clasped in adoration, eyes closed in devotion and lips moving in earnest prayer.

Otherwise the place is deserted, except for parties of inquisitive trippers and herds of indifferent animals. Buffaloes wallow in the cool waters of the moat, cattle amble casually along the causeways, birds build their nests in niches in the masonry, and thousands of bats use the towers as dormitories. All day they hang upside-down like huge black chrysalises, fast asleep, their presence betrayed by the ancient, sour smell filling the atmosphere around them.

I remember my last glimpse of Suryavarman's great funerary temple. After a day of fiery tropical heat the sun was setting. Its rays glowed on the western faces of the building, revealing their every beautiful feature. As the light of day faded they grew dimmer, and the lamp of a full moon shone ever brighter in the sky. A few birds called drowsily in the trees before dropping asleep, the nightly orchestra of jungle insects was already in full blast, and frogs croaked amorously beside the moat, where groups of buffalo and people were having their bedtime baths. A dozen monks walked noiselessly along the causeway like ghosts of Roman Emperors. The great monument was at peace.

So it will probably be every evening for the rest of time. Angkor Vat's glory should abide unspoilt as long as any scrap of evidence of human civilization lasts on the planet Earth.

## IX

After Angkor Vat decadence began to set its mark on Khmer architecture. The ascent to the summit of artistic perfection had continued at Angkor for nearly four centuries, and now the decline was to stretch over as many generations. It always takes much longer to climb uphill than to run down.



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But decadence has its own charm. For a long time after the completion of Angkor Vat new Khmer buildings continued to have impressive style and beauty; and in this further evolution of the art, even though it showed a decline, many bold and brilliant new ideas were produced, culminating in the great Buddhic faces on the towers of the Bayon fifty years later.

Suryavarman's three successors had short, troubled reigns. More destruction than construction of buildings took place, and the unhappy period reached its disastrous climax when the Chams captured, burnt and sacked the capital. But when Jayavarman VII attained power in 1181 that state of affairs was quickly reversed. Once more a strong man ruled, capable of giving firm and peaceful government. His capital lay in ruins. Except for its ancient stone temples, which survived the conflagration, he had to re-create it—and not content with building one city, this masterful man built four places almost within a stone's throw of each other at Angkor! The feverish orgy of building which occurred during the next few decades was perhaps never surpassed in any country until the Americans began to erect the sky-scrappers of New York.

Jayavarman's first task was to plan a strong, spacious new capital; but while that work was being deliberately undertaken he hastened to construct a smaller, temporary seat of government where he and his court could live in the meantime. He established it on the site of his decisive battle against the Chams, not far outside the old capital's walls. There it remains today, Preah Khan—'Fortunate City of Victory'. At about the same time he built two similar places in the neighbourhood. Ta Prohm and Banteai Kdei are each (like Preah Khan itself) formed round a temple dedicated to the memory of one of his close relatives. These three sanctuaries are amongst the most graceful of Khmer monuments.

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It is possible that parts of them were started in the reigns of Jayavarman's fleeting predecessors; but if that was so, their construction had not proceeded far before he assumed responsibility for it. At the same time he built lesser works near by, like the wide pleasure pool called Sra Srang, the charming edifice named Ta Som, and the exquisite gem of a temple known as Neak Pean. Elsewhere in his kingdom he founded other cities and shrines — and all the time he was completing his splendid capital, Angkor Thom.

His was indeed an orgy of building, a brief yet sustained period of hectic, almost crazy architectural creation. One gets an impression that the great ruler tossed off a new town almost as briskly as an artist paints a sketch, and a fresh temple as easily as a novelist writes a short story for a magazine. Naturally he did not do any of the actual building himself. The magnificent king never demeaned himself by wielding a shovel, handling a brick or even chiselling a statue. His thousands of slaves raised with infinite toil and sweat the vast structures, and his hundreds of craftsmen decorated them with painstaking skill. But at the central summit of the effort presided the author of the whole scheme — His Imperial Majesty. He must have been the initiator, the director, the inspirer of the mighty plan.

Much has been said to the effect that the quantity of this output damaged its quality; and there can be no denying the claim of professional critics that, in comparison with (for example) the solid, enduring construction of Angkor Vat, Jayavarman's creations betray many signs of over-hasty building resulting in serious constructional defects. The charming temple Ta Som is an example. A very pleasing little effort, with a design and decoration of enchanting taste, it was nevertheless in some ways badly, because hurriedly made. Its foundations were less firm than they might have



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been, and the building has tended to slip and crack more than the highest standards of construction would demand. Moreover, the fitting together of its huge slabs of stone was rather casually contrived, and the walls loosened more easily than they should have done. Consequently, when the jungle advanced on the deserted capital after 1432, and when virile young trees and shrubs began to lay hands on Ta Som they inserted their fingers without great difficulty into crevices in the stonework, and started to tear man's handiwork asunder. The main entrance to the sanctuary, for instance, is a gateway surmounted by a tower with large Buddha-like faces sculptured on all its four sides. At some moment generations ago a seed lodged in the masonry immediately above the arch, and now a lusty banyan tree spreads its branches over the tower, whilst its roots penetrate the vault below, descend like a cluster of exposed plumbing to the ground, and half block the entry. Other tendons of the roots clasp the gateway like a hundred tentacles of an octopus, clutching at its four carved human faces, blinding their eyes, crushing their noses and sealing their lips in a suffocating network of strangleholds.

Yet it would be foolish to exaggerate the carelessness of Jayavarman's building. It would be silly to speak — as some people tend to — of Preah Khan, Ta Prohm and other contemporary samples of architecture as if they were light works, mere slapdash, jerry-built, ephemeral products which would survive for a brief while and then disappear — visions of dreamlike beauty which, like dreams themselves, might soon dissolve into thin air. Certainly the impatient king built swiftly. It is said that the Bayon was completed in twenty-one years, and minor works like Ta Som must have been made in much less time — almost in a twinkling of the great potentate's eyes. Yet these places have now endured for nearly eight hundred years! That argues a certain measure of toughness.

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Nor has their treatment during most of those centuries been gentle, for they have suffered continuously the rough handling of the elements and the forest. Yet many of their walls stand firmly still, in places their design remains pure joy, and sometimes the workmanship on their sculpture is almost as sharp as it ever was. Only in comparison with a building like Angkor Vat do they seem a trifle weak and shaky — and Angkor Vat is one of the most enduring works ever made by man.

Of course, the jungle was winning its hard-fought battle against the monuments. When Henri Mouhot discovered Angkor the buildings were being slowly, inexorably overthrown. Gradually the vaults were cracking, the walls crumbling and the floors slipping. Here and there an edifice had already collapsed. It was the careful restoration done by French archaeologists directing Khmer labourers which in modern times turned the tide of fate, reinforcing and even reconstructing numerous sanctuaries. In temples like Ta Prohm and Ta Som, which have been deliberately left almost as they were found in the last century, we can study the extent of the ravages wrought by Nature during the first five hundred years after worshippers fled from their courtyards. The shrines seemed doomed, but the contest was still being vigorously maintained; the buildings possessed amazing strength and vitality, and they would have lasted for several more human generations. Of how many of our proud buildings raised in the twentieth century could such a boast, in similar circumstances, be made?

### x

The temple of Ta Prohm has been left more or less as it was found by the archaeologists who, soon after Henri Mouhot



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rediscovered Angkor, began the stupendous task of salvation and restoration. Its walls, roofs, chambers, corridors and courts have been sufficiently repaired to check further serious deterioration, and there has been a certain amount of additional tidying up. The quadrangles, for example, are kept fairly clear of bushes and undergrowth, though not of trees. Otherwise the buildings remain untouched except by the hand of Nature—the rude grip of the jungle fastened on them, and the fierce caresses of wind and rain.

The place is preserved as a 'museum specimen' of what a tropical forest does to a civilized city when man's protection is withdrawn. Many visitors think that it is the loveliest of all the Angkor monuments; and certainly the spectacle which it presents of the strength of a temple built by human hands matched in deadly struggle against the strength of a jungle created by natural forces is dramatic and awesome. The effect is heightened by the artistry of some of the sculptures which still appear intact amongst the semi-ruin of a gracious building half demolished by tumultuous vegetation.

The forest is a dense, deep, shadowy place. Though the sun may shine with scorching heat in a clear sky above, the jungle's ceiling is in parts so substantial that few bright rays insinuate themselves into the woodland below. Leaves are more numerous interlocked in sheltering layers overhead than are tiles on any man-made roof; yet they are thinner and more translucent, and so, while giving complete shade, they also admit sufficient light for a measure of vision on the ground below. Daylight is filtered through many thicknesses of green foliage, and has a mysterious, eerie quality. It is half-light and half-darkness—a lifeless, haunted sort of illumination such as might glimmer in a ghostly underworld.

At Ta Prohm the canopy of leaves is provided by many great fig trees, banyans, belans and other lusty timbers

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growing amid the ruins. The light which descends through it and ultimately reaches the sanctuary is a greenish twilight, more like lustre strained through depths of weed-covered water than any earthly brightness. In this atmosphere the courtyards appear like gigantic aquaria in which the sculptured niches, cornices and statues are sunken, shipwrecked treasure. If music were audible in such a spot, it would surely be the muffled chimes and deep, sepulchral chords of Debussy's 'La Cathédrale Engloutie'. One would not be surprised to see great fish swim through the dank air—sharks, swordfish, barracuda and sea-snakes gliding silently among tree-trunks and stone towers, as through channels in submarine grottoes. The boughs of trees twisting in mid-air, and their exposed roots crawling along the ground, do indeed appear like huge eels and serpents hunting on an ocean bed, whilst the shrubs and saplings seem like clumps of seaweed or coral. Gazing upon the scene, one has the impression of being a diver at the bottom of the sea.

Then you discover that the great stones around you are not shapeless rocks but intricately fashioned shrines built to the glory of the gods. The temple is a long, low edifice standing only one storey high, its central mass of masonry consisting of a series of chapels connected by vaulted corridors. From these on either side extend terraces with lesser sanctuaries. Images of deities peer from niches cut in garden walls, and beside short flights of steps figures of heraldic lions, hooded *nagas* and grotesque demons stand on guard.

Much of the building is in semi-ruin, and in places it has collapsed altogether under the weight of superimposed earth and arbours. There lie untidy masses of rubble, witnesses to the inferiority of Jayavarman's construction. Elsewhere trees planted themselves decades ago in crevices of buildings, and their vast trunks now spring from gables and towers. Their



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roots, finding no earth deep enough to sustain them in their stony seed-beds, stretch long distances before reaching congenial soil, crawling exposed across the roof-tops, spilling over eaves, dropping down high walls, and then wandering onwards again across flagged floors until they discover soft earth and burrow underground. The limbs of tropical creepers coil themselves round pillars, like boa-constrictors embracing victims in a death grip, gradually increasing their pressure to crack the bones, crush the breath and extinguish the life in their bodies. Everywhere these tentacles of jungle, as if in a frenzy of resentment at human beings' one-time interference with the forest, seem intent on breaking the works raised by man.

So the temple is held in a stranglehold of trees. Stone and wood clasp each other in grim hostility; yet all is silent and still, without any visible movement to indicate their struggle — as if they were wrestlers suddenly petrified, struck motionless in the middle of a fight. The rounds in this battle were not measured by minutes, but by centuries.

It is like a conflict between Life and Death, between living timber and dead stone, to test which shall ultimately be the master. Inevitably Life — the trees — would in the end have prevailed. And yet, paradoxically, every individual tree always lost its battle. Only the forest as a whole could eventually gain a victory in this long war. For although each tree as it grew ever larger, and strained, tore and wrenched ever more powerfully at the slowly cracking stone, seemed to be gaining an advantage, in time its trunk aged, weakened, withered and died. Its grip loosened, and the building remained sufficiently intact to survive that particular onslaught. The temple has lived already for nearly eight hundred years, and no tropical tree lasts as long as that. So Ta Prohm has seen successive generations of trees in turn grow, put forth

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their strength, make a little progress in disrupting it — and then succumb before their task was done.

Thus the monument outlived many waves of its opponents; but always fresh, young, stalwart enemies appeared to continue the combat. The temple was like a gladiator in an arena who fights a series of rivals, slaying each one in turn, only to find that after every victim's death a new combatant arrives to maintain the assault — until finally the champion himself is so exhausted that he is vanquished. In the end the Cambodian jungle would have won and, perhaps in one or two millennia, Angkor would have crumbled completely to bits — if after the first seven hundred years Henri Mouhot had not appeared on the scene and cried a halt to the slaughter.

At dawn at Ta Prohm — as at lovely Preah Khan, Banteai Kdei and elsewhere — there is a whistling and carolling of birds in the leafage overhead. No musical accompaniment could be more appropriate, for originally it was birds who placed many of the banyans, figs and hardwoods in their positions to destroy the Khmer builders' achievement. Unwittingly they carried and dropped seeds on this wall and that tower, this staircase and that gallery, where they germinated and sprouted and gradually grew to maturity as gigantic trees, cracking, dislodging and tumbling the masonry.

## XI

Though Preah Khan, Banteai Kdei and Ta Prohm are built on a much smaller scale than Angkor Vat, their general style is in many ways similar to that of the great tomb. They too have moats, enclosures, galleries, libraries and towers. But their central pile of buildings is not a pyramid temple climbing to a group of five sanctuaries representing the quintuplet peaks of Mount Meru. Jayavarman was a Buddhist, and that



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Hindu mythology meant little to him. So the collections of buildings, terraces and courtyards are spread more or less on ground level, reverting somewhat to the manner of Banteai Srei.

The architecture had become more precious, more ornate than that of Angkor Vat. The balance between large spaces of unobtrusive decoration and occasional concentrations of rich adornment which marks Suryavarman's grand masterpiece is absent in all Jayavarman's works. In them fancifully carved decor is almost continuous; it covers vast areas of masonry and allows little relief from it. Most of the sculptures are in pleasant, refined style, but there are often too many of them, and a lot of them are pretty rather than beautiful.

This quality appears in the charming but over-jewelled figures of female divinities who pose in profusion in niches and friezes, and in the forms of other creatures which adorn Jayavarman's palaces and temples. Elephants return to Khmer decoration, and *garudas*, too, add their touch of grotesque flamboyance to the busy sculptured scenes. In fact the whole elaborate show starts to betray signs of aesthetic decadence.

Yet the art is still vigorous and creative, and some of its inventions are not only original but magnificent and inspired. The famous balustrades along the causeways leading to Preah Khan and to the vast gateways of Angkor Thom, in which many-headed *nagas* are gripped in the strong arms of rows of demons and giants, are an astoundingly bold conception; and the towers of the gateways themselves, adorned on all their four sides with massive divine faces, are superb masterpieces of architecture. The faces all display the mysteriously gazing eyes and elusive smiles which are perhaps the most unforgettable expressions of Khmer artistic genius. Jayavarman had experimented earlier with this conceit above the

gateway at Ta Som. For a reason which I shall mention later, he was greatly taken with it, and repeated it in various places.

He always had a tendency to overdo things. In his earlier productions, Preah Khan, Banteai Kdei, Ta Prohm and the like, much of the detail is exquisite. Individual buildings have fine distinction; but they crowd together too closely, and their general plan is confused. Simplicity and perspective, austerity and spaciousness are qualities for which one searches in vain amongst the maze of halls, chapels, tabernacles, pavilions, porticoes, courts and other constructions.

Where this overcrowding does not occur, the work is very pleasing. One of the choicest examples is the small temple called Neak Pean. This sanctuary is almost diminutive, and is a solitary, beautifully designed, lotus-shaped tower rising from the middle of what was once a decorative pool. A few statues of mythological creatures also stand in the now empty basin. When the pool was full, and the shrine and its attendant sculptures broke the surface of reflective waters, the group must have had singular charm.

As I walked away from my first visit to Neak Pean, marvelling at the little temple's delicious grace, a nut falling from overhead suddenly hit me with a sharp crack on one shoulder. I presumed that it had dropped accidentally from a tree in the avenue where I strolled. Then a second nut struck me forcibly on an ear. This seemed too deliberate and aggressive a repetition of the assault to be mere coincidence. Moreover, judging by the vigour of the missile's contact with me, it appeared to be travelling at a velocity greater than the normal speed of gravity, as if it had been projected with special intent to strike me. Scarcely had this suspicion formed in my mind when it was confirmed by half a dozen nuts falling like catapulted pebbles all around me.

Looking up, I saw a troupe of monkeys sitting in branches



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overhead, wearing the innocent, exaggeratedly indifferent air of schoolboys up to mischief. So long as I kept my eyes on them their demeanour was unexceptionable; but as soon as I looked away another shower of nuts fell at my feet. As I stepped into my car they pattered on its chassis like a storm of hailstones. I looked up into the trees once more, and the monkeys returned my gaze with polite stares.

I picked up a nut and threw it back at them. They chattered excitedly, and seemed gratified by this demonstration that I too was at heart just another little monkey.

### XII

Jayavarman's principal architectural achievement was the rebuilding of his capital. He raised Angkor Thom on the site of the old city, which had remained the seat of Imperial Khmer government almost continuously since the first Yaso-varman founded his capital of Yasodharapura three hundred years earlier. In the intervening centuries it had experienced many changes as king succeeded king and their varying needs or tastes caused them to pull down old palaces, temples and streets and construct new ones in their places. Now the city was to receive its last transformation and take the final shape which its ruins in the Cambodian jungle indicate today.

The Chams had spared no effort at destruction when they sacked the place, but some of its stone buildings survived. For example, the temples of the Phimeanakas and Baphuon still stood, and these were incorporated by Jayavarman in his new plan. Much of the rest had to be reconstructed, though he adopted the general lay-out of the royal centre conceived by Suryavarman. It was a task well suited to Jayavarman's powerful, insatiable creative urge.

When Angkor Thom was newly completed it must have

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been a wonderfully impressive city. Its size was colossal. The moat surrounding it extended more than eight miles, enclosing completely the four sides of a square metropolis. This wide channel of water — probably stocked with crocodiles as an extra protection against enemies — formed the outer defence works of the capital. Immediately inside it rose a tall, massive wall built of stone, for Jayavarman learned when Yasodharapura was burnt how vulnerable is a fortress guarded only by wooden palisades. The inner side of the wall was buttressed by a high mound of earth, along the top of which ran a terrace for troops to man the ramparts.

The moat was crossed at five places by causeways leading to the five gates giving entry to the city. These causeways were bordered by their famous sculptured balustrades of *nagas* gripped by scores of giants and demons. The gateways were handsome, monumental structures spanning lofty arches, for they had to admit processions of elephants with retainers holding sunshades over the heads of princes lolling on the monsters' backs. The massive flanks of each gate were decorated by gigantic, three-headed stone elephants, and the towers above were adorned with four vast, smiling Buddhic faces. In magnificence these gates compare with any of the architectural creations of classical Greece or Rome.

The area within the walls was more spacious than that of any walled city in medieval Europe, and could easily have contained the whole of ancient Rome. Yet it is believed that this enclosure, like the Forbidden City in Peking, was only a royal, religious and administrative centre accommodating the court and the chief civil, ecclesiastical and military dignitaries. The rest of the population lived outside its walls in suburbs spreading perhaps beside two artificial lakes — the East and West Barays — and along the banks of the Siem Reap river as far as the shore of the Great Lake. In those



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places numerous bazaars were a scene of constant petty commerce, and beyond them stretched mile upon mile of peasants' rice-fields.

The regal centre of the capital was the Grand Plaza, already partly laid out by Suryavarman I. Jayavarman beautified it. To its Kleangs and Towers of the Cord-Dancers he added the most decorative feature of the place, the Royal Terrace. Its great length is covered with bas-reliefs on which elephants, *garudas*, lions, *devatas* and other creatures sport in multitudinous pageantry. Close by is another of Jayavarman's ornamental edifices, now known as the Terrace of the Leper King. Rows upon rows of figures of kings and queens, princes and princesses on its walls form the most concentrated assembly of semi-divine royalty in all Khmer sculpture. On the greensward above is the strange statue, of earlier date, which gives the place its name, for legend said that it represented a Khmer monarch who suffered from leprosy — though later scholarship alleges that the figure is that of neither king nor leper.

The Grand Plaza must have presented a splendid appearance when Angkor Thom was the proud, lively capital of an Empire. A wide, open space surrounded by noble buildings, it was the hub of the city. Along one side stretched the wondrously sculptured walls of the Royal Terrace and the Terrace of the Leper King. Flights of steps led through these to the lawns and pavilions of the royal gardens beyond, in the centre of which rose the glories of the palace. The stately Baphuon stood on a hill overlooking this splendour, and close by was another imposing imperial tomb, the Phimeanakas. Ranged opposite were the dozen Towers of the Cord-Dancers, and behind them more walled terraces with flights of steps led to the two Kleangs. At the ends of the Plaza were Preah Pithu and other temples and public

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buildings, and from it radiated in all directions the main streets of the city, with vistas of avenues, statues, pools and fountains. The place had a spacious dignity as fine as that of any civic centre on earth.

A stone's throw from the Plaza stood the Bayon, the temple of temples in Jayavarman's new city. It was the most ambitious of his architectural conceptions, the most fabulous of his dramatic designs, the most astonishing of his megalomaniac dreams. In some ways its plan followed the hallowed Siva-ite tradition of Khmer sacred buildings. Though it has no moat, surrounding walls or outer enclosures, it seemed to be basically a pyramid temple raised in three steep, successively receding platforms. But this intention was then overlaid by the whim of the Buddhist king to make it an overwhelming exhibition of the worship of a supreme Buddhist divinity. In the place of spacious terraces bearing occasional towers culminating in five central sanctuaries, it is crowded with more than fifty towers which intrude everywhere on the terraces and reduce them to little more than corridors between these close-packed pinnacles. It is all very confusing.

Many details of the sculpture are attractive. Thus the shallowly cut figures of dancing *apsaras* on pillars in the lowest terrace are as engaging as could be, and they convey charmingly the light, gay natures of these heavenly creatures, who were said to have no mothers and fathers but to be born on the flying spray of ocean waves. The more fully rounded forms of *devatas* in niches beside doors and windows are also extremely gracious, and the bas-reliefs depicting contemporary Khmer life — which I have described in the last chapter — are vigorous. But all this decoration is too crowded. On the Bayon there is scarcely a square foot of space uncovered by assertive, bizarre carvings. The building is less a work of architecture than a colossal exhibition of sculpture.



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One French commentator, Commaillé, who was an authority on decoration rather than architecture, wrote: 'It would be superfluous to insist on the beauty of the Bayon and its particular charm. The visitor will notice at once that this temple, although of dimensions less vast than its immense neighbour, Angkor Vat, is of a superior conception and that it is here that we must study the genius of the masters of Angkor. In a relatively restrained space the constructors of the Bayon have been able to enclose more marvels than in all the other Cambodian temples combined. . . .'

That is exactly what seems to me to be wrong with the Bayon. Into its comparatively small space it crowds more 'marvels' than can be seen in many other temples put together. Its over-ornateness is a mark of decadence.

Yet certain of its features are undeniably magnificent, in the fullest sense of the word. They combine beauty with power. They are works of genius—but one has an uneasy feeling that it is the genius which is akin to madness. Those features are the temple's fifty-odd towers, and they reveal the megalomaniac strain in Jayavarman's character.

As on his city gateways, so on every side of every tower appears a tremendous sculptured face of a divinity—more than two hundred exactly similar countenances with mysteriously half-closed eyes and enigmatically smiling lips. Crowned with jewelled diadems, and with ear-rings dangling from their elongated ears, whilst pearl necklaces depend around their necks, each one rises eight feet high. No masterpieces of sculpture anywhere are more compelling, more haunting, more hypnotizing. And perhaps part of their fascination springs from the fact that they are faces of Jayavarman himself, the once modest, humble priest who twice renounced the throne and then became the mightiest of all Khmer rulers; and whose head swelled incredibly until he

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imagined himself to be the living Buddha. The multitude of great carved masks on the Bayon's towers are all symbolic likenesses of the king-god himself. The temple was his supreme act of self-worship.

Many people regard it as the climax of Khmer art, the loveliest work of a race of superhuman builders, the noblest expression of a wonderful civilization. Some highly qualified critics think it finer than Angkor Vat. With respect, I cannot agree with them. As a fantasy the Bayon has never been excelled, but as a work of art it lacks pure beauty. Perhaps some of its sculpture is superior to anything of the kind in Angkor Vat, but as an architectural tour de force it has not the simplicity combined with mass, the austerity associated with rich decoration, and the strength allied with serenity of the earlier temple. It is a piece of extravagance, a sample of gorgeous decadence, a sort of 'folly'. Human vanity has never been more devastatingly exposed. And, leaving aside that mortal defect, as an essay in architecture it was overdone. The characteristic faults in its construction have caused some towers to crumble, and time and weather have also mellowed its forms, but even so its multitude of faces seems too blatant. I cannot help thinking that when the building was brand-new, and they peered through lowered eyelids with spick-and-span freshness on the world, they must have looked a trifle vulgar.

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Nevertheless, the Bayon is second only to Angkor Vat amongst the glories of Angkor; and the city of Angkor Thom, whose heart it was, remains one of man's most memorable creations. Perhaps the forest which has now overgrown the place, enclosing the ruins in a wild park, lends it



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new qualities of loveliness which did not grace it when it displayed more bare stone and less verdure. Possibly its jungle days have been in some ways its most romantically beautiful. But the life in its streets seven hundred years ago must have added vivid touches of movement and colour which expressed its human essence, putting a soul into a city which is now only a dead body. The crowds of citizens in the roadways, priests strolling on their way to worship, grandees going home in golden palanquins, palace slave-girls hastening on the monarch's errands, and elephants bearing dignitaries to the royal court — these daily sights of the capital at the height of its power no longer enliven the scene. The Royal Plaza is now empty, and other of its brightnesses have also faded. In the old days many turrets of important buildings were gilded. They must have glowed and glittered in the sunlight as beautifully as does the golden spire of the Shwedagon Pagoda in Rangoon today, 'shining like a motionless flame'.

In those times a magnificent bird's-eye view of these splendours was visible from the temple called Bakheng situated just outside the city walls. The hill on which it stands is the only considerable height protruding from the plain for many miles around, so it commands a very wide prospect. One may perhaps imagine picnic parties of Khmer citizens centuries ago climbing its slopes to enjoy the cool air and admire the landscape from its summit. Far away along the southern horizon they could see the gleaming waters of the Great Lake, with silhouettes of mountain ranges beyond; to the west stretched the expanse of the vast artificial pool named the West Baray, with farmlands round its shores; and in the distant north rose a line of hills including Phnom Kulen, whence the stone for Angkor's temples came. In the foreground to the south-east appeared the towers, courts and moat of Angkor Vat, and immediately at the hill's foot,

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south-westerly, lay the capital city itself — first the defensive stretch of water crossed by many-statued causeways, then the high walls breached by five majestic gateways, and inside the ramparts all the richness of Angkor Thom. With gold glittering on the temples' pinnacles, silver fountains splashing beside its thoroughfares, and all the movement and colour of human life in its streets, the place must have presented a brilliant sight. Beyond its farther boundaries were the other cities and sanctuaries of Preah Khan, Ta Prohm and Banteai Kdei, the pool of Sra-Srang shimmering in the middle-distance, the pyramid temples of Takeo, Pre Rup and East Mebon grouped near by, and Banteai Samre standing beside the mirror of the East Baray. Filling the rest of the landscape, as far as the eyes could see in every direction, were the countless villages and boundless rice-fields of the great plain, all basking in warm sunlight.

Today the scene is covered with jungle — trees stretching to the horizons everywhere and hiding all else except the gleam of the Great Lake in the far distance, the glitter of what remains of the West Baray, and the grey towers of Angkor Vat rising above a green sea of foliage. Even the ruins of Angkor Thom are concealed behind a wild screen of woodland growing up Phnom Bakheng's slope.

The Bayon was the last of the fine monuments constructed at Angkor. It was the grand finale of Jayavarman's stupendous, sustained effort at building. Perhaps even before its completion he died — and then his people relapsed into a state of exhausted inactivity. He left them too tired to create any more. For the next two centuries they continued to enjoy — in the manner of a polished, sophisticated and cultured yet passive society — what had already been created; but they lost the inspiration and the will to express themselves in fresh outbursts of art.



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So the great works of the Khmer race at Angkor, from the temple at Ak Yom built at the start of the ninth century to the Bayon raised at the beginning of the thirteenth, had run their course. They remained in their various places, still mostly used for worship, though the Kambujans were gradually turning from the hierarchical Hindu religion of their forebears to the simpler faith of Hinayana Buddhism. Possibly the spreading influence of this new belief caused some temples outside the capital to be neglected, and to begin to fall into decay before Angkor Thom was overwhelmed by the Thai invasion of the fourteen-thirties. In any case that disaster promptly put an end to the active lives of all these splendid buildings.

Then the forest engulfed them for five centuries — until their ruins were rescued from complete destruction by French archaeologists following in the wake of Henri Mouhot. We owe it to these men that so many great monuments have since been marvellously preserved. Their arrival on the scene was none too soon. The buildings had maintained a gallant resistance with remarkable fortitude, had withstood the assaults of the encircling jungle with almost incredible persistence; but after five hundred years of siege they were rapidly weakening. Like a half-starved garrison near the end of a protracted defence, they were growing feeble to the point where capitulation could not be long postponed. At that crisis the French savants came to the rescue. They broke the siege just in time, and their patient, skilful organization of relief measures has now given new life to the veteran survivors of the ordeal.

The romance of Angkor's rebuilding by French scholars is in some ways as stirring as that of its original building by the Khmer kings. Bit by bit these devoted Frenchmen have repaired the sanctuaries and cities, until many now stand

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almost as grandly as they did in their prime. In some cases the archaeologists reconstructed them from shattered masses of rubble. Nor did they only piece together from heaps of stone the great buildings themselves; they also re-created from innumerable broken inscriptions the history behind the temples. With sedulous scholarship, as fragment after fragment of engraved writing was unearthed, they unravelled the mysteries of Khmer development and rewrote the narrative of Khmer civilization. Often their work was done by a process of trial and error. Earlier theories were proved wrong by later discoveries, dates had to be revised over and over again, and ideas on the chronological sequence of events were frequently changed. The story, for example, of the re-dating of the Bayon from the ninth to the thirteenth centuries, with all the consequential reassessment of the evolution of architectural styles and of the significance of individual monarchs which that involved, is one of the most astonishing tales in the annals of historical and cultural research.

The dynasty of the French savants who have thus brought to life again for posterity the dynasties of the Khmer kings includes many brilliant scholars. Their names are worthy to be enshrined in some sacred corner amongst the temples.

When I first visited Angkor one of the last, but by no means the least, of these men was still in charge of the ruins. He was Monsieur Henri Marchal, the discoverer and reconstructor of the exquisite gem called Banteai Srei. Almost eighty years old, his venerable age did not prevent him from walking with youthful briskness for hours on end as he conducted me on lightning tours through the monuments. Indeed, a shortsighted person observing the agility with which he leapt up steep flights of steps in Angkor Vat, and noticing also his locks of wind-blown grey hair above a long face, gentle eyes and a little Imperial beard, might have been



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pardoned for mistaking him, at first sight, for a mountain goat. His fund of information about the ancient tombs, his genius as a raconteur of history, and his charming, philosophical and witty personality made him a perfect guide amongst his beloved temples. One of my most fortunate experiences at Angkor was my introduction to them by him.

## CHAPTER FIVE

# The Modern Khmers

I HAVE returned to Angkor several times since then, and also to Phnom Penh. The pleasant capital of modern Cambodia stands near the spot where King Jayavarman II established his first royal seat of government before he moved to Angkor about 800, and on the exact spot where the monarch who fled from Angkor in 1434, King Ponha Yat, built his new city. I have already described my visit to Phnom Penh in 1948. During the next few years I went there on numerous occasions to discuss with King Sihanouk and his ministers the problems afflicting South-East Asia in general and Cambodia in particular.

It was a significant moment in Cambodia's history. For nearly a century the country had been a French Protectorate, existing contentedly under the benevolent, if imperial guidance of friendly and cultured administrators from Paris. Associated with it in this easy-going subordination were the other picturesque states of Indo-China: Laos, Tonking, Annam and Cochin-China, the last three now collectively named Vietnam. In the Second World War they fell under the authority of the Japanese, and French prestige suffered a reverse. A political nationalist movement called the Vietminh gathered strength in Vietnam, and after the restoration of French Government in 1946 it raised the flag of violent revolt. The story of the bitter civil war fought in Vietnam during the following few years is well known.

In next-door Cambodia peace prevailed. But there, too, yearnings grew amongst intellectuals and politicians for re-



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lease from foreign rule. The historic moment of the great Asian Revolution had arrived, when an upsurge of nationalist feeling swept like a tidal wave across Southern Asia, capsizing a whole series of foreign colonial administrations and carrying into power many indigenous governments. By 1948 India, Pakistan, Burma, Ceylon and the Philippines had become independent sovereign states, and events were hastening towards the same end in Indonesia, Malaya and Indo-China.

Like all their neighbours, the Cambodians were infected by the nationalist spirit, and they agitated to gain national freedom. In a sense it was an example of history repeating itself, a distant echo of the temper in old Kambuja nearly twelve hundred years earlier, when the Khmer nation was subservient to the imperial power of the Kings of the Mountain in Java, and the youthful Jayavarman II moved from the Phnom Penh region to assert his independence in Angkor. Now another young ruler sat on the throne in Phnom Penh — King Sihanouk.

Originally he had succeeded to the throne by the same antiquated constitutional procedures as had long been customary at the accession of Khmer kings. On the death of his predecessor a select group of royal councillors gathered to perform the supremely responsible duty of choosing the new king. They could pick whomever they thought most suitable amongst the surviving male members of the reigning house within a certain degree of consanguinity to the deceased ruler. When they met in 1941 they did a remarkable thing. After most conscientious consultations they passed over the claims of Prince Sihanouk's cultured father, of two able uncles and other experienced relatives, and cast their votes for this youth of eighteen years. The times were troubled and changeful; all sorts of new political ideas were invading Cambodia as well as the rest of Asia. Exceptional qualities not

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only of stability but also of adaptability would be required in the nation's new leader. He must have unusual gifts. Indeed, he must possess a talent for guiding a Revolution. I do not know whether the members of the august selection body foresaw all this when they made their fateful decision, and whether their reasons for making the particular, and in some ways surprising, choice which they did were clearly felt to be of the nature that I have suggested. Possibly other motives helped to sway their judgment; and in any case, no doubt, various subtle thoughts contributed to the ultimate conclusion, as was normal on such exalted Oriental occasions.

It is too soon for a final verdict to be pronounced on their work. Contemporary events in South-East Asia are still in an uncertain stage of development, and ex-King Sihanouk — for one of the astonishing turns in his career was his abdication several years later — is still a young man. So far, however, amidst a baffling confusion of counsels he has remained — whether on the throne or off it — the master of his country, and has given his people courageous, wise leadership through many difficulties. It seems that, consciously or accidentally, the selectors' choice in 1941 was extraordinarily shrewd.

In the earlier years of his reign some people questioned this. They thought the King a charming young man, but perhaps too light-hearted. He had many diverse, attractive gifts, some of them not necessarily required in a prudent monarch. He was a writer of romantic poetry, a composer of gay music and a competent pianist. In his drawing-room in the Private Palace, amongst the Khmer sculptures and other works of art, stood a Steinway grand pianoforte on which His Majesty diverted himself in leisure hours. He was also a skilled artist on a more unusual instrument, the saxophone. Indeed, he was the conductor of a dance orchestra, every member of which was a prince of the royal blood. With his



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own baton he directed his own playing on his own wind instrument of his own musical compositions in his own band. Being even more up-to-date than that, he had lately taken to directing cinema films made from his own scripts, which he shot with his own camera and in which he himself sometimes played a role.

These activities were partly frivolous recreations and partly serious pastimes. He was a keen supporter of the traditional arts and crafts of his people, but he wished them to be living, creative expressions of the national being, not lifeless, fossilized forms. Thus he was a patron of the Cambodian village drama, and encouraged the rustic actors to perform pieces with modern themes as well as those recounting ancient myths. He was a generous benefactor, too, of the Royal Corps de Ballet, and commanded its ballerinas to dance not only episodes from the classic *Ramayana*, but also scenes representing more up-to-date aspects of life. One talented member of the company was his own charming daughter, Princess Buppha Dhevi.

His zeal for equestrian sports was likewise pursued for both pleasure and duty. He loved horse-riding as an exhilarating exercise at which he himself excelled, but he appreciated it also as an occupation which developed manly qualities in the officers of his army. One of his enthusiasms was for the Royal Khmer Army. He showed towards it not just the formal, condescending patronage of a king towards soldiers wearing the king's uniform, but the serious, anxious concern of a statesman who sensed that the times were dangerous, that his country might be threatened, and that the armed forces must be in a state of readiness to defend the nation's existence. Sometimes he spent weeks on manœuvres with his troops, and later—after the withdrawal of overriding French military authority—became for a while not only their titular but also their actual Commander-in-chief.

In addition to these other preoccupations he could not

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avoid being drawn into politics. The public life of the country revolved largely round him, for he had inherited the traditional suzerainty of the old Khmer kings. During the century of French rule that royal power had been maintained in theory but suppressed in practice by the superior influence of foreign administrators, but the colonial period was now passing and the royal supremacy could be gradually resumed. In high political affairs he became the most consistently influential personality in the kingdom, and even on occasions, when the party leaders quarrelled so badly that they failed to form a government, acted as his own Prime Minister.

And in addition he was King! On his young shoulders lay in pregnant, perilous times the almost intolerable burden of rule. Being the King of Cambodia, he was something more than a mere monarch. By his subjects he was regarded as not only the supreme secular but also the supreme religious figure in the realm. They believed him to be a prince and priest with semi-divine qualities—just as their forefathers had worshipped his ancestors in Angkor as king-gods.

Modern Cambodia is in some ways very different from ancient Kambuja. It is a much smaller, much less important place. Yet in other ways it is the same. Traditions persist, continuity is maintained, and the deep beliefs of the people abide. Their king should be their lord, their leader and, in times of trouble, their saviour.

It was not impossible that the times would be troubled. Although the kingdom was small, it occupied a significant position in South-East Asia. Lying close to the borders of China—where the Communists were in 1948 about to extend their authority triumphantly over the whole mainland—the little country was a frontier state between the Communist and the Democratic worlds. A territory, therefore, of some political strategic importance, it might be subject to pressures from



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both sides, and might find difficulty in achieving and maintaining its independence.

### II

If some observers in the early years of King Sihanouk's reign thought that his delight in cheerful pleasures was a sign of an engaging but somewhat irresponsible nature, they misread his character. These interests were the hobbies of an exuberant and gifted youth compelled to assume prematurely the cares of government. They stayed with him and helped to keep him young in spirit long after his elevation to solemn responsibilities; but as he gained knowledge in his new duties his natural intelligence quickly ripened. He began to form mature judgments on contemporary public affairs. I for one watched with admiration his qualities grow.

The development of his ideas on political and diplomatic problems can be traced in countless speeches, proclamations and actions which he made during those years. He was instinctively a Cambodian patriot, sincerely eager to serve the well-being of his countrymen; and he was therefore a representative type of modern Asian, inspired by the desire to end alien rule and achieve self-government. Translated into Cambodian terms, this meant that he wished his subjects to be freed from French overlordship, and to become an independent, sovereign nation.

But the situation was not as simple as that. The rising, typically twentieth-century political urge in Cambodia was not just a longing of nationalists to free their country from a foreign yoke. Contemporary sentiment was revolutionary in other ways too, and some local radicals wished to release their country from an allegedly oppressive system of traditional native society which included amongst its encumbrances the

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monarchy itself. These zealots were opposed to every vestige of ancient 'feudalism', and the fact that for a few generations the Cambodian royal family had appeared willing instruments of French Colonialism made the position of the monarchy all the more precarious. Republicans increased in numbers in Phnom Penh and were inclined to give King Sihanouk the same short shrift as had been accorded to crowned heads in many other countries in these iconoclastic times.

In that uncertain situation King Sihanouk was guided by his natural capacity to feel sincerely, observe clearly and act courageously. One reason why he succeeded was that his own spontaneous sympathies lay with all the legitimate purposes of the Cambodian radicals, not with only parts of them. He was not interested in ending French rule to restore the old regime and become, selfishly, the traditional despot of his realm. He was determined to end other features in the national system which weighed oppressively on the people. He wished to introduce political, economic and social reforms which would give them a fuller, better life. In fact he was a revolutionary himself. The only aim on which he differed from some ardent spirits was that he did not intend to abolish the monarchy. On the contrary, feeling proudly that throughout Khmer history the kings had been the leaders of the nation, whom their subjects trusted and to whom they looked for guidance, he resolved that the King himself should lead the revolution.

For a few years these thoughts were latent in him, not active. He was young and inexperienced; he needed time to learn the problems of government; he had to establish his own as well as his people's confidence in himself; and in any case the moment was not ripe for decisive action to gain national freedom. The reduction of French power should be not a sudden but a gradual process. The French must be



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humoured, not alienated. Independent Cambodia would be a small nation, and would need the support of larger, friendly nations in this dangerous world. Its position on the frontier between the Communist and the free worlds exposed it to certain risks. King Sihanouk and his countrymen desired national independence, but they were democrats who wished their freedom to be founded on liberal, parliamentary institutions. They did not want to jump out of the frying-pan of French Colonial rule into the fire of Chinese Communist domination. So they needed the friendly sympathy of more powerful democratic nations who could lend them aid in case of emergency. France, so well known and understood by the Cambodians — the cultured, civilized France which had done so much for Cambodia in recent generations — would be their first choice as an ally, if the French would adapt themselves to a new relationship of equality and partnership instead of superiority and overlordship.

So for a few years King Sihanouk temporized, did not press the demand for complete independence, asked only for a succession of preliminary concessions from Paris, and kept reaching compromises with the French. The more extreme, impatient nationalists lost confidence in him, and Republican sentiments amongst the left-wing intelligentsia gathered strength. Communist ideas, too, began to spread in some quarters.

Meanwhile a situation fraught with danger had developed across the border. The Vietminh movement, posing as purely nationalist, had fallen under potent Communist leadership, made formidable progress in Vietnam and threatened to extend its activities into Cambodia and Laos. Suddenly in 1953 units of its guerilla army invaded both those small states under the guise of liberators seeking to drive out the French Imperialists. The position was critical. All sorts of

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unpleasant possibilities loomed. One manifestation of the ugly mood which infected some sections of Cambodian opinion in Phnom Penh was the murder of Monsieur Raymond, the French High Commissioner. He was stabbed to death by his trusted valet as he lay asleep in bed at the Residency in the once friendly, peaceful little capital.

As soon as the Vietminh invaded the country King Sihanouk took personal command of his troops. Side by side with French comrades-in-arms, they fought to eject the intruders. Some months earlier he had increased his political demands from the French. Resolving that the time had come for decisive action, he insisted on early, complete independence. In fact he showed himself the champion of his people's freedom from both the old French Colonialism and the new Communist Imperialism.

When the French hesitated, the King did some extraordinary things. On one occasion he left Phnom Penh secretly by night, motored unheralded across the frontier into Thailand, established himself as a voluntary exile in a hotel in Bangkok, and announced that he would not return to his country until the French conceded full sovereignty. His friends and foes alike were perplexed, thinking his conduct as politically injudicious as it was monarchically unorthodox. Professional diplomats pronounced his policy deplorably amateurish, and intellectual nationalists judged it puerile. Almost everyone thought that he had misjudged the situation, and that such behaviour would only end in his losing his prestige and position.

But they were wrong. By its dramatic nature the Bangkok excursion — though it lasted only a week, and King Sihanouk returned to Phnom Penh without the immediate satisfaction of his main purpose — helped to force the issue; and after a few more insistent efforts on his part he gained his end.



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French statesmanship adjusted itself to the situation, and in a friendly declaration in 1954 the Government in Paris expressed its readiness to negotiate an agreement establishing Cambodia as an independent nation.

### III

The mainspring of King Sihanouk's success was his character. His sincerity both as a Khmer patriot and as a friend of France enabled him to understand how Cambodian and French interests could be reconciled; and his flair for judging when to act, and for acting then with uncompromising zeal, gave effective point to his purpose. Yet these qualities alone would not have sufficed. By themselves they would have been too slight. He buttressed them by making himself an irresistible expression of the Cambodian people's will. If he had not based himself strongly on popular approval, the left-wing section amongst the local nationalists might have roused damaging criticism of him for his policy of continuing friendship with France, whilst the French might have felt able to maintain resistance against his extreme request for outright independence. It was his genius that he built his strength on support from the people, that he went out to meet the ordinary, humble peasantry, mixed readily with them, made himself their personal leader, and rallied their aid. Their traditional devotion to the monarch responded generously; loyalty to him became a vivid reality; they developed a mood to back him in all his policies; and he became their hero to a degree which destroyed any chance on the one hand of political rivals stealing their favour and on the other of the French denying his demands.

I had opportunities to watch how he exercised his popular leadership. On one of my visits to Cambodia in 1954, for

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example, he was away from Phnom Penh touring a southern province, making speeches in the villages, meeting the local population and discussing with their headmen their rustic problems. At the end of the tour he would holiday for a few days in his villa at a pleasant seaside resort called Kep; and he sent a message to me inviting me and Richard and Ruth Heppel, the British Ambassador in Cambodia and his wife, to stay with him there.

When we arrived at his guest-house we expected the Court Chamberlain to greet us at the door, convey words of welcome from His Majesty, inform us at what hour the King would be pleased to receive the Ambassador and me, and show us in the meantime to our rooms. But there was no Court Chamberlain. There was not even an aide-de-camp in sight. Instead King Sihanouk waited on the veranda with both hands outstretched in greeting and a smile of glad friendship on his face. Beside him stood a serene-eyed, shaven-headed, saffron-robed Buddhist monk who was one of his trustiest counsellors, and at his back hovered some servants ready to take our suitcases. No reception could have been more informal—or more characteristic of him.

Our host told us his plan for our entertainment. He wished us to see the countryside; so he proposed that we should drive some scores of miles across the coastal plain to a mountain rising abruptly from the lowlands, ascend the height, eat a picnic lunch on its summit, and then return to Kep in time for a sea bathe before dinner. The sun would be hot, so would we like to change into light, open-necked shirts? If so, he would do the same. Could we be ready in half an hour's time? And would I be so bold as to trust myself to being driven by him in his sports car? The vehicle had one or two novel features in its mechanism which had been built to his design, and a number of gadgets for the passengers'



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comfort were also his own inventions. But, he said with a laugh, they seemed to work all right, so he hoped that I would be safe. I accepted the invitation with glee.

When we assembled at the appointed minute he was sitting at the wheel of his car, talking through its window to his Minister of Finance, who was in attendance on him at Kep. I jumped in beside the King, and the others found places in a convoy of vehicles behind. The party included a group of local officials who were to be King Sihanouk's guests for the day.

My illustrious chauffeur hooted his horn, a lorryload of police on the road ahead jerked into motion, a royal foot was pressed on a dutifully obedient accelerator, and we were off.

As we drove along a highway bordering the ocean and then turned inland among paddy-fields, the King talked of current political developments in Indo-China. Sometimes he spoke in French and at other times in English, as the spirit moved him. By dint of earnest study (for little but Khmer and French was spoken in Cambodia) his English had greatly improved in the last few years, and it was much better than my execrable French. His conversation flowed easily as he discussed the instability of the position in Vietnam, the iniquity of the Vietminh invasions of Laos and Cambodia, and the problems of relations between newly independent Cambodia and old Imperial France. He spoke frankly, forthrightly and occasionally excitedly. His face was animated as he told me his perplexities in the present and his hopes for the future. I expressed my opinions with equal candour, and in the course of a three-hours' journey we surveyed thoroughly the contemporary situation.

But our talk was frequently interrupted by diversions beyond the car windows. News of His Majesty's journey had

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evidently travelled ahead of us, and everywhere the country folk were eager to catch a glimpse of him. At the sight of the police truck preceding us by a hundred yards they ran to the sides of the road to stare. Near each farm-hut a family group was gathered, in every hamlet a cluster of peasants lined the street, and in market towns large crowds of citizens had assembled. As they peered into the car to see their king they clasped their hands in devotion, and many people fell to their knees with arms upraised in homage and faces radiant with something akin to adoration. It was a moving demonstration of simple, spontaneous, popular affection.

The King's response was equally remarkable. He greeted with friendly words every single group that we passed. As we approached, he slowed the car's pace, waved a hand gaily from the window and shouted a few sentences to the delighted spectators. Even if we were meeting only a single individual standing at the edge of a field, he did that. He spoke in Khmer, and I could not understand what he said beyond an occasional un-Khmer phrase which sounded extraordinarily like 'Malcolm MacDonald'.

He explained to me that he was telling the people that I was his companion in the car, that he and I were friends, and that Britain was a staunch supporter of Cambodia.

'They'll be very pleased,' he remarked with his sincere smile.

Sometimes the men and women called words back to him. He had asked about the state of their crops, or the extent of their land, or the health of their families, and they were answering him. His attitude to them was self-confident but not superior. It was natural, courteous and unaffectedly friendly. Except for those clasped, upraised hands of his subjects, he and they might have been familiar acquaintances passing the time of day.



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Occasionally he was amused at the utter astonishment in some rustic's eyes.

'The fellow can hardly believe it's me in this sports-shirt,' he remarked merrily. 'He expected to see me in a court uniform with a crown on my head!'

So he greeted many thousands of his subjects scattered in small groups and modest crowds along a route of some sixty miles. Eventually we came to the foot of the mountain, left the farmlands and began to climb a steep, zigzag track amongst thick-growing forest trees. There was now no population except wild beasts and birds. The branches of trees on either hand joined like the vault of a green tunnel over our heads, and we saw no other landscape until we emerged into open country along a highland ridge three thousand feet above sea level.

In due course we came to a group of imposing yet dilapidated buildings. They were not ancient monuments like the temples at Angkor, but ruins of contemporary Cambodia. A year or two earlier they had been a royal hunting-lodge, a hotel for tourists and a few private houses. Then a band of Communist-Vietminh marauders climbed the mountain at a season when they knew that no one would be there to resist them, laid some sticks of dynamite in the buildings, and blew them to bits. Now the roofless and doorless walls were starkly exposed to the elements, mute witnesses of this bloodless, shattering Vietminh victory.

Our cars drew up in the deserted, grass-grown courtyard of the hotel. The building's gaunt skeleton stood near the edge of a precipice which descended almost sheer to cultivated fields far below. The view was breathtakingly beautiful. A wide plain of farmlands stretched to a coast indented with shapely bays and capes; beyond their shores lay the sparkling, sunlit waters of the Gulf of Siam; scattered in the

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ocean were numerous shaggy, jungle-clad islands; and behind the isles was the infinite meeting of sea and sky along a wide horizon. It was one of the most magnificent prospects that I have ever seen.

The dining-room of the hotel was still partly habitable. Its vacant windows and doorways and half-broken roof admitted wind and rain, which had stripped the walls of paint and plaster; but the pretentious dimensions of the chamber preserved a certain gallant dignity such as one sees in impoverished aristocracy; and that afternoon some of its pristine splendour seemed restored by a long banqueting-table laid in its centre. The King's servants had preceded us, and had spread regal porcelain, crystal and silver on its white tablecloth set for the two dozen members of our party. It was strange to see this lavish display—worthy of the palace in Phnom Penh—erected in a grim ruin exposed to the sky. But the sight was welcome, for we felt hungry after our long journey, and soon we were attacking enthusiastically roast duck and other delicacies provided by our generous host. It was a right royal picnic.

Whilst we lunched, and then gossiped over liqueurs and coffee, a number of foresters and other local rustics, learning of the King's presence, gathered in the courtyard to see him. Before we left he went to speak with them. They were simple folk, and when he appeared they fell on their knees in an instinctive gesture of homage. With unaffected naturalness he strolled towards them, calling words of friendly greeting. He went to each one in turn, laid a hand gently on his shoulder and asked about his name, his occupation, his family and his well-being.

I reflected how these yokels thought him not only their king but also an incarnation of divinity, and I realized something of their unspeakable emotion at feeling his kindly touch.



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Yet there was nothing condescending or patronizing in his manner. He spoke as a man to men, with a humanity and understanding which banished any shyness or awkwardness between them. Nor was his attitude feigned, an affectation to gain their favour. An observer could sense his true esteem for these people. His was the conduct of a man who instinctively loved his fellows, who cared for them and regarded the whole Khmer nation as a family united by common interests. In that family he certainly regarded himself as the father, with the authority which belongs to that position; for, like the peasants themselves, he too was a son of the old Khmer tradition—having faith in the King and in the goodness of his rule. If, following that tradition, his government was in some ways autocratic, it was autocracy at its most benevolent. And to the authoritarianism of past ages he introduced the democratic spirit of a new epoch in Asia. By some magic instinct the young King combined the best of the old order with the best of a new.

### IV

After winning independence the Cambodians were confronted by many problems of internal government. They concerned economic, social and political affairs, and some of them were very controversial. None was more so than the question of what form the new constitution of the realm should take. King Sihanouk held strong views on the subject, and was at the storm-centre of the argument.

He was a staunch democrat, but he felt that fully developed parliamentary democracy could not with prudence be established forthwith amongst an inexperienced, illiterate population accustomed to paternal authoritarian rule. An earlier Cambodian constitution had attempted that, with some

unfortunate results. The people needed gradual training in the exercise of unlimited democratic liberties, and as a step in that process the King now wished to introduce an arrangement by which all local councils would be elected directly on a wide popular franchise, but the national assembly would for the time being be indirectly elected. I need not discuss here the merits of his proposals, for this chapter is not a detailed narrative of recent events in Cambodia. Critics inside the country and some interested friends outside opposed his plan.

Suddenly, without any warning, he abdicated on that issue. One morning the citizens of Cambodia and the outer world woke and were stunned and shocked to read the news that he had voluntarily, and apparently impulsively, stepped from the throne. He made it known that this act was due to his thwarting on the constitutional question. Sceptics shook their heads once more, and declared that this was further evidence that Prince Sihanouk — as he had now again become — was an unstable and rather irresponsible personage who had not the serious, sustained application necessary to guide the new Cambodian nation through the manifold difficulties of youthful independent existence. Once again they were proved wrong; the King's admittedly astonishing action was an indication of the very opposite — a sign that he was prepared to go to any length to serve his fellow-countrymen.

When he abdicated he left Phnom Penh and withdrew to Siem Reap, where he had recently built a villa for himself near the ruins of Angkor. His father and mother succeeded him as King and Queen, and no doubt he wished to avoid embarrassing them by his presence in the capital during the early days of their reign. Moreover, he wanted peace and quiet, away from the clamour of politicians, the questions of journalists and the glare of publicity. He had to consider deeply his and his country's future.



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Yet he could not escape the attentions of party leaders and others concerned with affairs of state. He had made himself by far the most popular and significant man in the land, and no one else could decide his own conduct until he knew what Prince Sihanouk would do. So many notables visited him in his retreat in Siem Reap, and for the first time in six hundred years Angkor became once more the centre of political activity in the kingdom.

Soon afterwards his father appointed him to lead Cambodia's delegation at the famous conference of Asian and African governments in Bandoeng. On his way to Indonesia he stayed with me for two days in Singapore, and again for another day on his return journey.

In conversation I asked him whether his apparently spur-of-the-moment abdication had in fact been long premeditated.

He replied that he had considered the possibility for some time, but that he only decided that the moment for the step had arrived when he was opposed in his wish to alter the constitution.

'The nature of Cambodia's problems has changed,' he said. 'Until recently our supreme need lay in the field of international affairs: we wanted independence from the French. As king I could lead the nation in striving for that, and eventually we got our way. Now our main problems lie in the fields of internal affairs. There's urgent need for administrative reforms, economic development and advances in social welfare—all necessary to enable us to improve the standards of living and happiness of the ordinary people. As king it was difficult for me to lead in those matters. The occupant of the throne shouldn't intervene too much in domestic political questions. He should be above politics. So my power was limited; I felt restricted; and I decided to

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abdicate so that I could play my full part in helping my countrymen to progress in modern ways.'

He explained much else. He would not, for example, get involved in party politics or become a party leader. As an ex-king and continuing member of the royal family, that would be wrong. He hoped that his influence would be at the disposal of all constitutional parties. Indeed, he thought that there should be a cessation of party warfare for a while, and that a government of national unity should be formed. He was now working to accomplish that.

He spoke about his plans for agricultural, public health and educational development, and invited me to visit Cambodia again, to stay with him at Siem Reap and see some of his new schemes. We agreed that I should go there two weeks later, immediately after his return from Bandoeng.

'Do you like water-skiing?' he suddenly asked, with his characteristic enthusiasm for robust physical sport. 'I'd like to take you water-skiing on the West Baray at Angkor.'

'That's a wonderful idea, sir,' I answered. 'I love skiing.'

I did not tell him that I had never been on water-skis in my life. His invitation was to me a royal command, and I did not wish to fail him. Moreover, the prospect of water-skiing on the great artificial lake made by King Suryavarman I nearly a thousand years ago seemed too romantic to be resisted.

Thinking over the project afterwards, I decided that it would be prudent to have a lesson in water-skiing before the command performance at Angkor in the following week. So during the intervening week-end I visited the celebrated Supersonics Water-Ski Club at Ponggol Point in Singapore, where a select and charming group of youths and maidens sport on the ocean waves. Fortunately I had ski-ed some years earlier on Canada's snows, and found that the two techniques were not too dissimilar. To my great relief I rose from the



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shallows at the first attempt, and slithered easily over the sea's rippling surface.

A few days later I went to Siem Reap. Prince Sihanouk's villa was a modest place with only three rooms, but it was furnished in attractive modern taste and stood in a walled garden containing a swimming-pool. No retreat from the bustle of the world could be more peaceful and pleasant.

My host had arranged an interesting programme of activities for my stay. On the first morning he took me to see an irrigation and land settlement scheme several miles away. A long canal was being driven through a tract of arid country, where bulldozers were clearing ground for cultivation and new colonists were beginning to move in. Before long the region would be green and fertile, a fruitful creation of Prince Sihanouk's zeal.

That afternoon he led me on a tour of inspection of a new school, a new district hospital and a new convalescent home for Buddhist monks in Siem Reap. They were impressive signs of a fresh era of development in rural Cambodia. The school-teachers, doctors and nurses were city-trained, eager, smiling representatives of a novel type of expert public servant in the countryside.

The Prince discussed with them their daily problems. He was evidently familiar with their work, and showed close interest in its every detail. At the monks' rest-house he made a speech formally opening the building, for it had just been completed. In the school he took temporary charge of a class of children, asking them questions about their lessons, giving the answers when they could not provide these themselves, speaking to them about his hopes for the progress of their homeland, Cambodia, and telling them of the useful parts which they could play in its future. All this he did with a simplicity and sincerity which seemed to make him and them

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partners in a grand adventure. That half-hour must have been an unforgettable inspiration for those young citizens.

Next morning His Royal Highness let me play truant amongst the ruins of Angkor whilst he attended a conference of political leaders who had come to Siem Reap to seek his counsel. I revisited a number of the glorious monuments, renewing acquaintance with the sculptured demons and giants along the causeways leading into Angkor Thom, with the *apsaras* dancing on the walls of the Bayon, and with Rama's martial hosts of monkeys leaping on the towers at Angkor Vat. The great temples were as wonderful as ever, standing with the serene, self-assured air of indubitable immortals.

Afterwards I joined the Prince and his visitors at a picnic lunch on the ancient stone terrace overlooking Jayavarman VII's vast pleasure pool called Sra Srang. The company was remarkable. It included a score of leading members of half a dozen rival political parties, a selection of the most prominent men in the nation's public life. A few weeks earlier some of them had scarcely been on speaking terms with each other; but now in genial fraternity they munched sandwiches and drank beer under the conciliatory presidency of their royal master. They seemed to be in carefree mood, their conversation was light-hearted and gay, and only occasionally did a few grow serious and discuss earnestly some point connected with the business of their gathering. Their conference had met to consider the possibility of ending party squabbles, co-operating for the well-being of the state, and forming that government of national unity about which Prince Sihanouk had told me a fortnight earlier in Singapore. The goodwill which they showed towards each other was an encouraging augury for the success of their deliberations.

Tall jungle trees shaded the terrace where we sat, shielding



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our party from the fiercest heat of the tropical sun. A flight of steps guarded by crouching stone lions descended to the pool, which stretched as wide as a small lake, with the silent forest all around. The prospect was as peaceful as it was beautiful. Sitting there, I sensed the meeting of ancient and modern history now occurring at Angkor, the blending of the stories of old Kambuja, whose countless kings had made their country famous, and of new Cambodia, whose ex-King Sihanouk was striving to make the land once more worthy of renown.

A few days later his guests of that afternoon announced an agreement to form a political organization called the Socialist Community, in which all their parties would collaborate; and some months later the Community captured every seat against small opposition groups in independent Cambodia's first general election.

As we lunched at Sra Srang that day a crowd of rustics gathered on the edge of the woodland to stare at us. Rumour had spread through the neighbourhood that Prince Sihanouk was there, and, as always, he acted as a magnet attracting the people. Foresters, peasants and labourers among the ruins flocked with their wives and children to catch a glimpse of him. They squatted on their haunches in the grass beyond the terrace, and started a jibber-jabber of speculation about this extraordinary occasion.

After a while Prince Sihanouk interrupted his duties as host to his distinguished guests, and went to speak with these humble folk. They fell on their knees, with hands clasped before them in reverence. But he put them at ease at once by cracking a joke which made them guffaw with laughter. Then he started asking them questions. This or that man or woman in the crowd answered him. He asked more questions, and the interview became a general conversation in which

they all felt free to join. Sometimes the Prince made sustained little speeches to them whilst they listened intently and occasionally muttered some guttural phrase of agreement or query in comment. Judging from his tones, he seemed to be lecturing, twitting, chiding and encouraging them in turns. Every now and then they burst into throaty laughter at some sally which he made. They had lost all sense of shyness. As he talked, old crones chewed wads of betel-nut, young women suckled babies at their breasts, men threw remarks into the conversation quite naturally, and children stared in wonder at this impressive example of royalty. Yet some of the adults never for a moment lowered their hands raised in pious devotion towards the prince.

For his part, the incident was not just an act of formal regal greeting to a group of casually met subjects. Had it been that, he could have closed the encounter after a minute and returned to the statesmen near by. He was deeply interested in these village people and their lives, felt a responsibility to help them, and believed that he and they belonged to one another. So he maintained the conversation for a long while, until he could no longer politely neglect the picnic party. Then he made a courteous gesture of adieu to the crowd, and they shouted their affectionate gratitude to him.

I realized that this young prince, the descendant of a long line of absolute autocrats, had discovered the secret of good government — that government should be by love. A government must of course be possessed of many qualities; it should have strength and authority and wisdom. Yet all these together are not enough. Unless rulers are inspired by affection for the people under their care, they will lack the understanding and sympathy, that instinctive communion with the multitude, which alone can help them to meet the population's needs. And only if the people feel that their rulers



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love them will they love their rulers, which is the essential bond making a united and happy nation.

### v

Later that afternoon the Prince, the politicians and I went to the West Baray for our water-skiing. His Royal Highness and I were to be the performers, and the others came as a slightly sceptical and highly amused audience. The West Baray was the huge reservoir built by King Suryavarman I in the eleventh century to give his capital a reliable water supply and to help to irrigate the surrounding agricultural plain. In its heyday it stretched five miles in length and more than a mile in width, but now it had shrunk to a third of that size. However, it still contained plenty of depth of water to drown rash sportsmen.

Whilst boatmen tested the engines of the motor-launches which would tow us, we sipped tea in a pavilion overlooking the lake. In the jungle close by stood the ruin of Ak Yom, the oldest pyramid temple at Angkor. A hot sun shone from a clear sky, and cormorants, grebes and wild duck sported on the lake, swimming and diving in happy ignorance of the rude invasion of their feeding-ground which was about to occur.

When all was ready Prince Sihanouk entered the water, fitted on a pair of skis, crouched in the shallows and waited tensely while his motor-launch manœuvred to its starting-point. At a signal the boat gathered speed, the Prince was dragged for a few moments with dubious, near-treacherous splashing towards deep water, and then suddenly rose like a sea-god from the waves, stood erect and skimmed safely forward over the surface of the lake. A yell of loyal delight escaped us watchers on the beach, whilst flotillas of cormorants

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dived in fright and flocks of wildfowl flew panic-stricken in all directions.

The Prince made two wide circles round the Baray with splendid dash and unfaltering grace. Then it was my turn to try. As luck would have it, the skis proved equal to their task of bearing me on the waters, and no mishap occurred to spoil the thrill of my first swift slither across the great tank of the Khmer kings. The courtiers on the shore took the hint that this was a simple occupation, and two or three got into bathing-trunks and shuffled on to skis. After numerous duckings they revised their opinion of the sport, and contented themselves with judicious sun-bathing.

Prince Sihanouk repeated his successful run half-a-dozen times. The lake was as calm as a mirror, and gliding over its glassy, sunlit surface was enjoyable exercise. Like him, I took several turns. It was exhilarating sport, rushing at top speed over the boundless rink of water, swinging in wide arcs first in this direction and then in that, slaloming nonchalantly in shorter, sharper twists from side to side, tossing on choppy wavelets as one passed diagonally across the launch's wash, and at the end of each run alighting with swaggering poise within a few feet of admiring spectators on the beach. As I repeated these antics with apparent impunity my confidence grew, and I decided to demonstrate an accomplishment which even Prince Sihanouk had not displayed. That was of course an unpardonable piece of lese-majesty.

As I sped over the lake I shifted my weight on to one ski, shook the second ski off my other foot, and continued the journey on one leg. For a while I remained upright, and a cry of astonishment rose from the shore. Leaning slantways across my solitary ski, so that it swerved swiftly away from the direct line of advance of the launch ahead, I shot outwards in a wide semicircle of rushing motion. I was very



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conscious of the fine figure that I cut. But I had misjudged the movement, and raced onward too fast. My speed exceeded that of the boat, the rope connecting me with it went slack, my pace slowed, and my ski began to sink. In the fraction of a moment before the rope went taut again to pull me safely forward once more I failed to adjust my balance, and capsized with the ski. As I sank, the lake rose in high splashes all around me. One column of flying spray seemed to assume the ghostly form of King Suryavarman, and I thought I heard him hiss: 'That'll serve you right for taking such outrageous liberties with my reservoir.'

### VI

Next day a special ceremony was held. Amongst his other constructive works in Siem Reap, Prince Sihanouk had built a new royal palace, so that the King (now his father, good King Samarit) might occasionally stay in the little town. His Royal Highness thought that the monarch should often go on progresses through his kingdom, and Siem Reap was the seat of a provincial Governor. Moreover, there was something romantically symbolic in the idea of the King holding court near the site of the historic capital of classical Kambuja.

The building was more imposing than the Prince's private villa, and the workmen had completed it a few days earlier. That morning happened to be the anniversary of the Buddha's birth, an auspicious date for the official opening of this first royal palace in the neighbourhood since the Thais sacked Angkor Thom in 1431. Prince Sihanouk did me the honour of inviting me to perform the ceremony.

A crowd of townspeople gathered in the courtyard before the new royal residence, a guard of honour of local policemen stood smartly at attention along its drive, and an array of

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saffron-robed monks sat serenely beneath its porch. Entry to the palace was barred by a silk ribbon stretched across its front steps. I cut the ribbon with a pair of scissors, the head priest blessed the spot, and Prince Sihanouk and I crossed the threshold. As we went from room to room the holy man accompanied us pronouncing benedictions on each apartment in turn. The political leaders had all returned to Phnom Penh, but the local Governor and other notables followed in our wake.

Afterwards His Royal Highness made presents of new togas to all the monks, and then the whole company enjoyed a feast of curry. Some monkeys gazed inquisitively from trees overhead, an eagle soared majestically in the blue sky, and perhaps from some remoter heaven the spirits of the great Khmer kings looked down benevolently on the sunlit scene.



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76, 84, 88, 90, 94, 98, 101 and 110 are by the author.*

*All the others are by Loke Wan Tho*





I HIS ROYAL HIGHNESS  
PRINCE SIHANOUK



2  
HER ROYAL  
HIGHNESS  
PRINCESS  
BUPPHA DHEVI



3 & 4

THE THRONE HALL IN THE PALACE AT PHNOM PENH

5

THE ROYAL ORCHESTRA, WITH THE CHAMBER OF MUSICIANS IN BACKGROUND







6 & 7      A LINGAM AND A KHMER STATUE OF THE 7TH-8TH CENTURY  
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14 ANCIENT TOWERS AND MODERN MONKS' QUARTERS AT LOLEY











16 PARTS OF THE 9TH CENTURY TEMPLE AND THE MODERN MONASTERY,  
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EAST MEBON

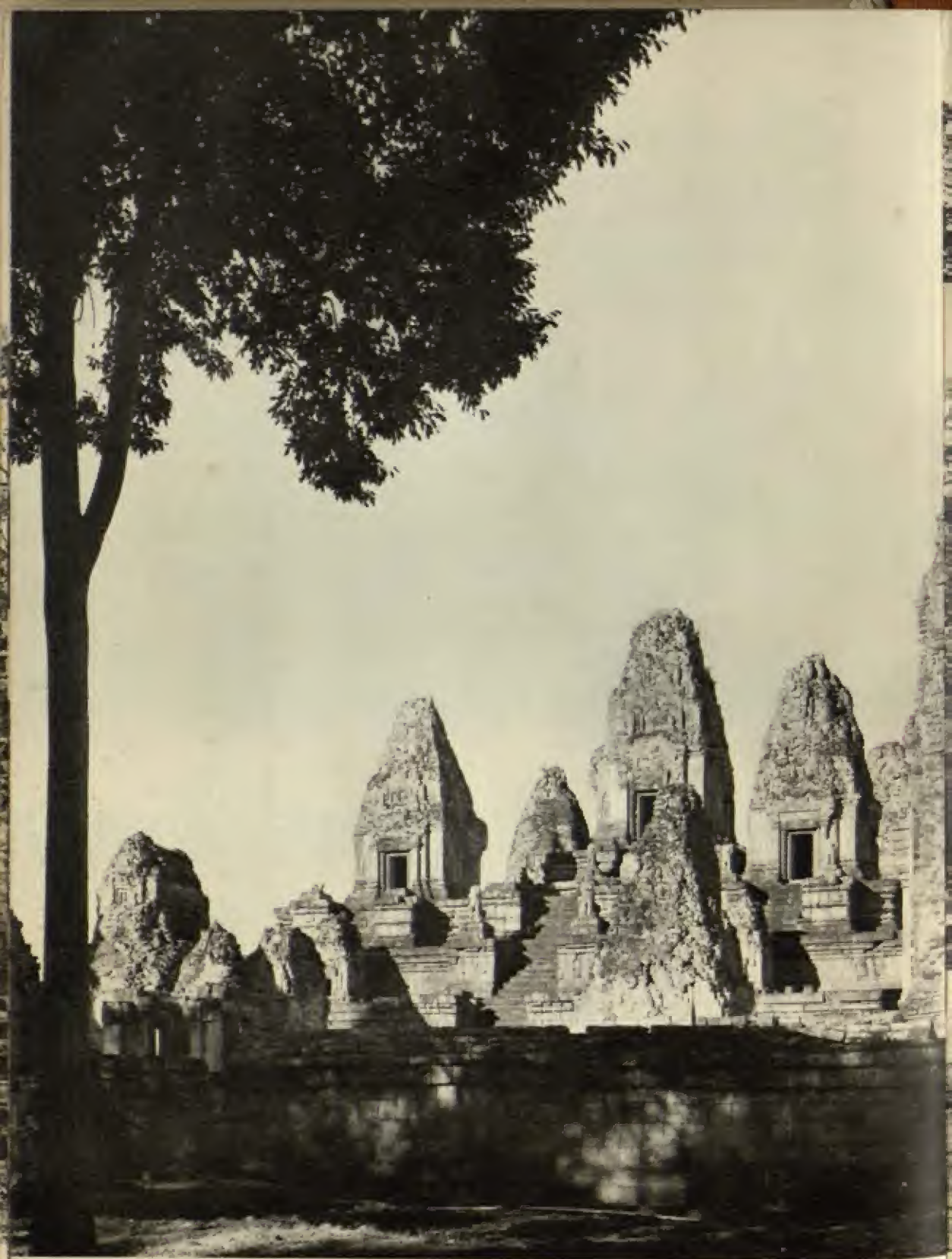
24

BAS-RELIEF AT PRASAT KRAVAN





























31 BANTEAI SREI, INSIDE THE GATEWAY

32 AND THE TERRACE OF THE CENTRAL SANCTUARIES







33 & 34

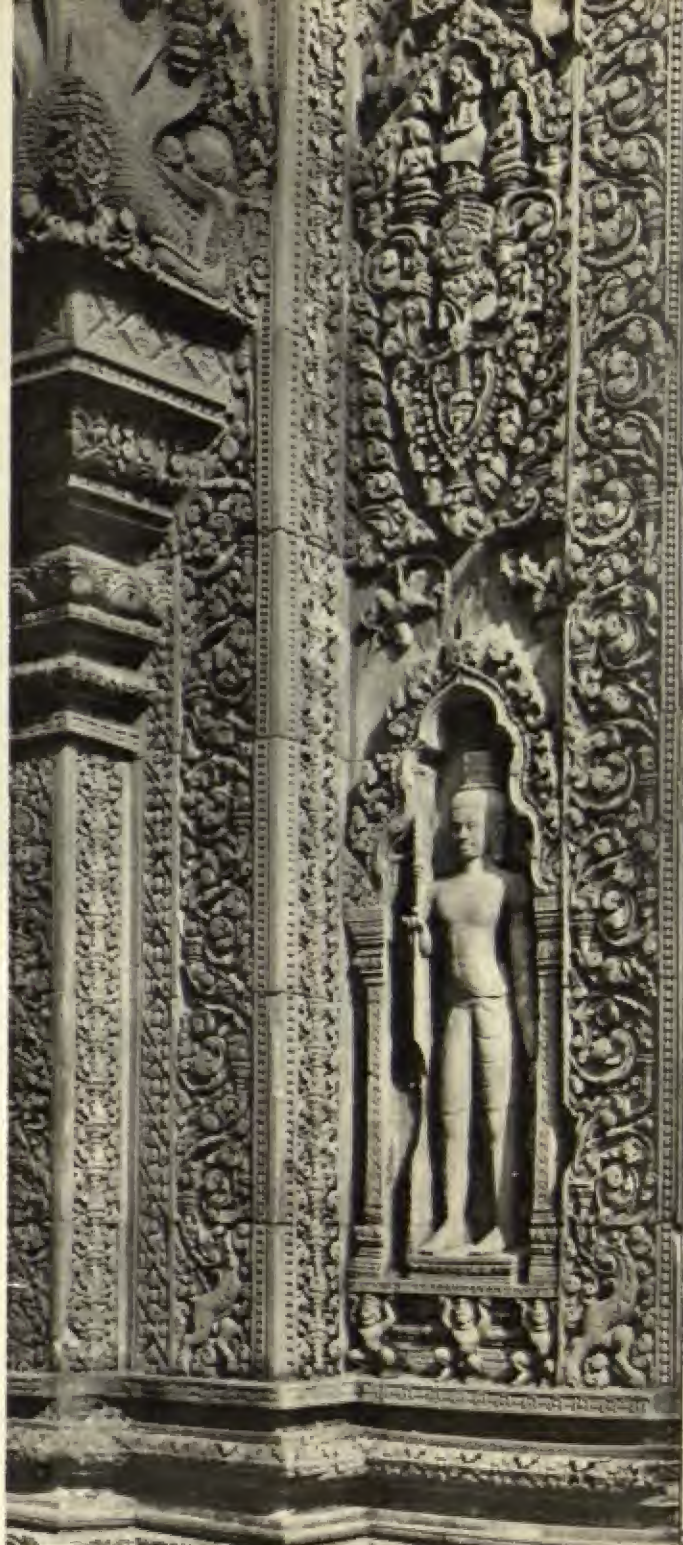
SCULPTURED FIGURES OF  
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TERRACE SURROUNDING THE  
SANCTUARIES AT BANTEAI SREI



















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DETAIL OF DECORATION ABOVE A GATEWAY AT BANTEAI SREI

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ANGKOR VAT, TWO INNER COURTS







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CAUSEWAY AND GATEWAY AT PREAH KHAN











72 AT PREAH KHAN

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AN ENTRANCE TO PREAH KHAN















76 & 77

AN ENTRANCE AND COURTYARD AT TA PROHM















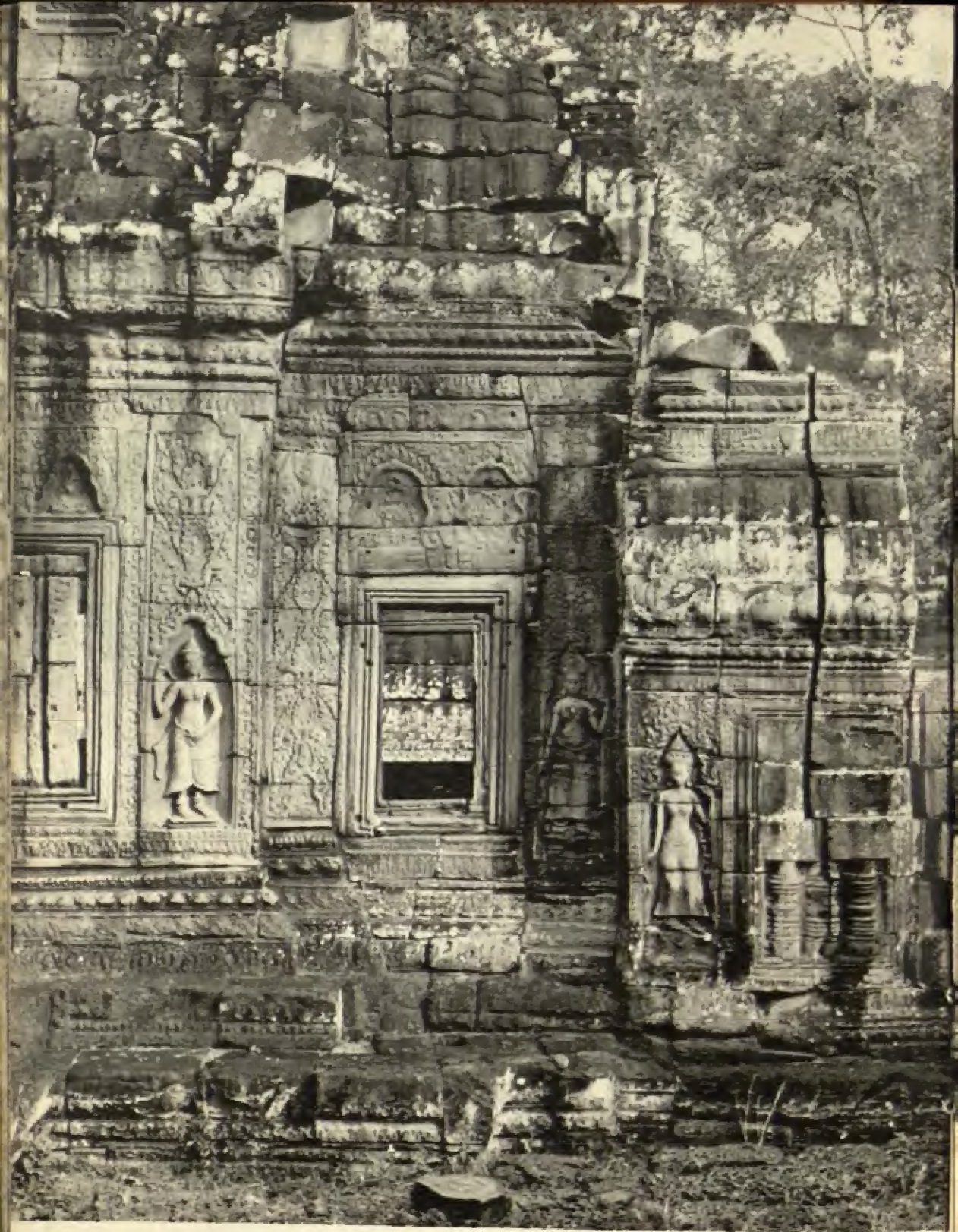
80 ENTRANCE TO BANTEAI KDEI

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84 NEAK PEAN  
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A GATEWAY INTO ANGKOR THOM















88 CAUSEWAY TO THE GATE OF VICTORY, AND

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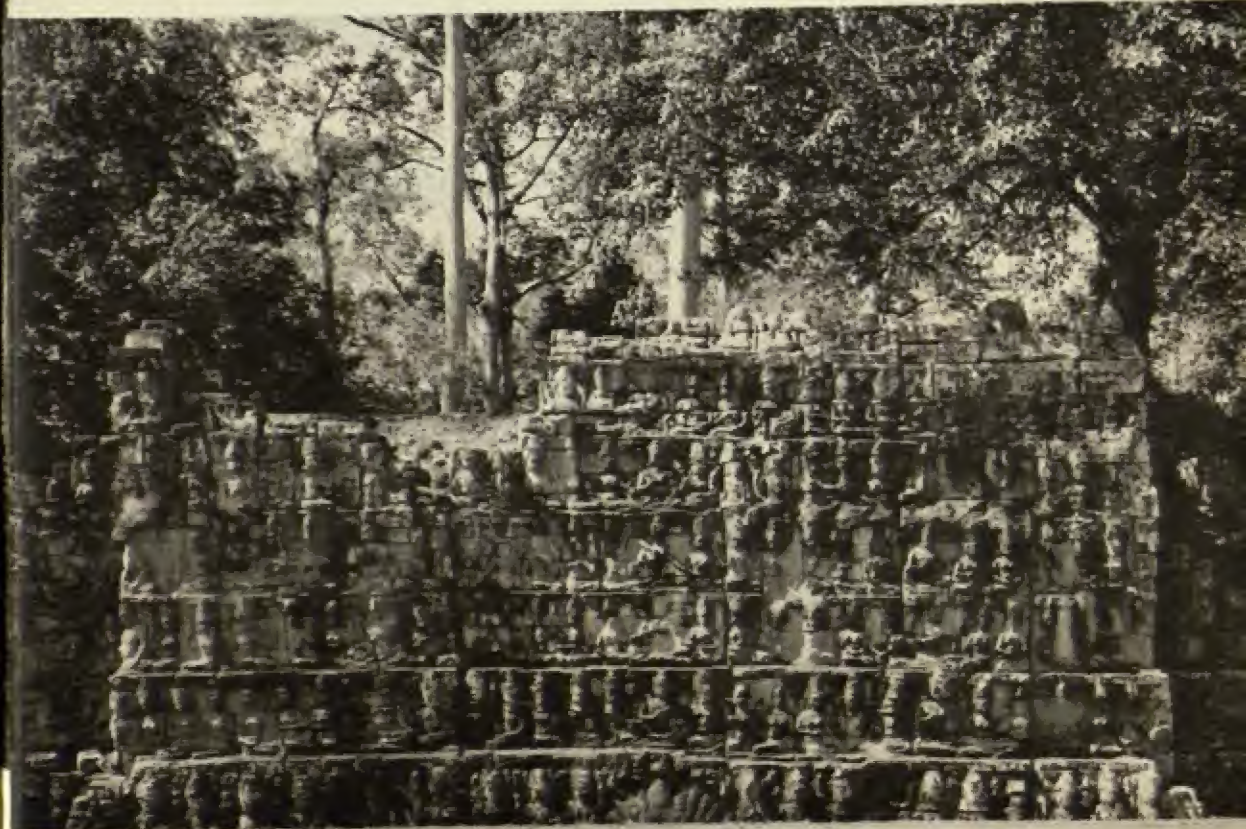








91 MAIN ENTRANCE OF THE ROYAL TERRACE, AND  
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104 & 105

DETAIL OF BAS-RELIEF AT THE BAYON

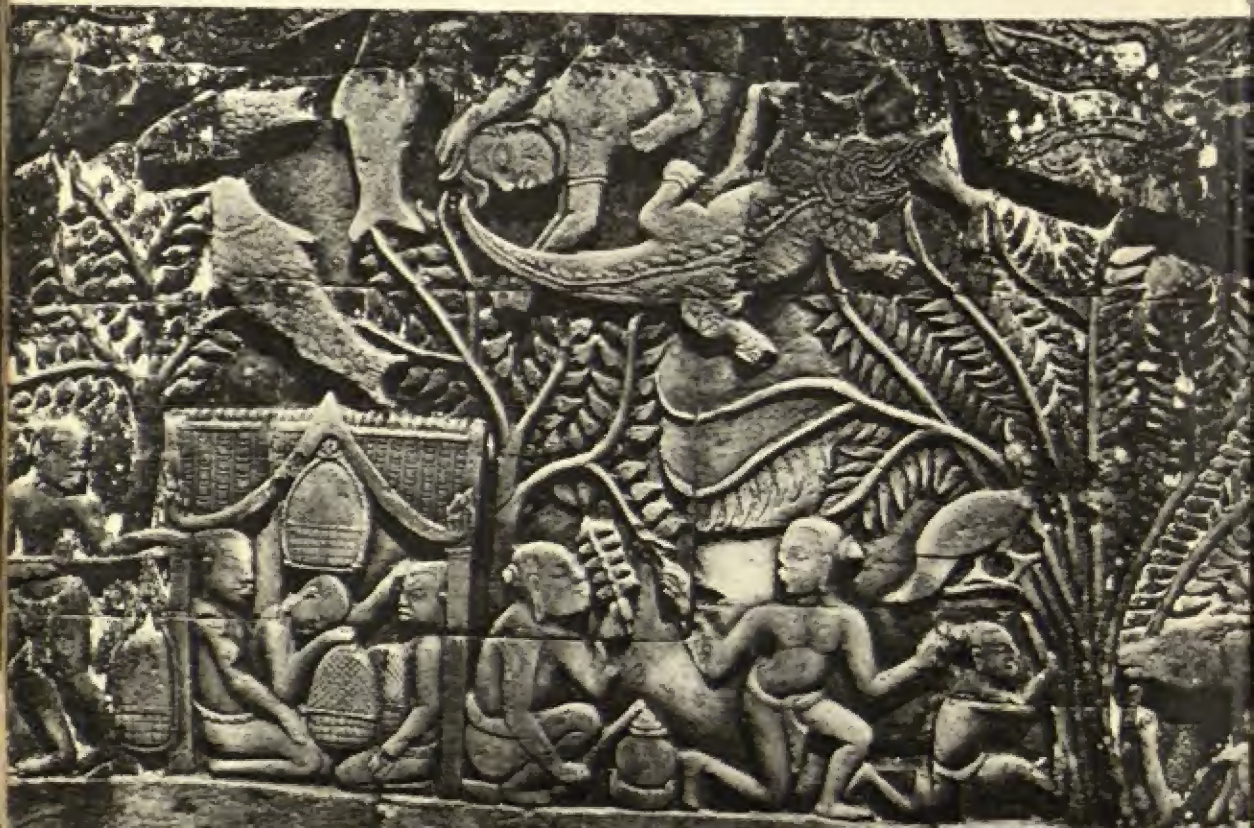




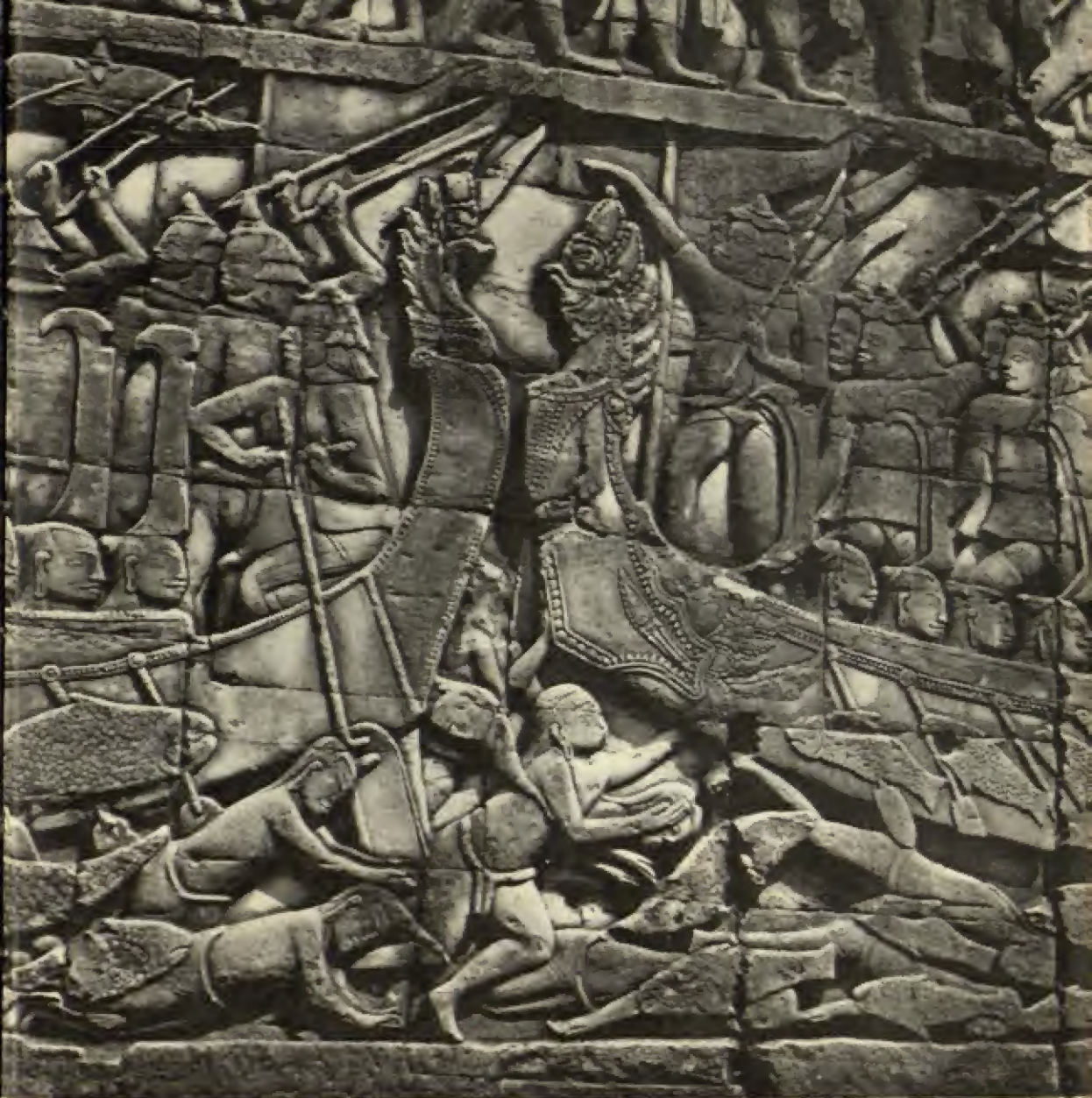


106 & 107

DETAIL OF BAS-RELIEF AT THE BAYON







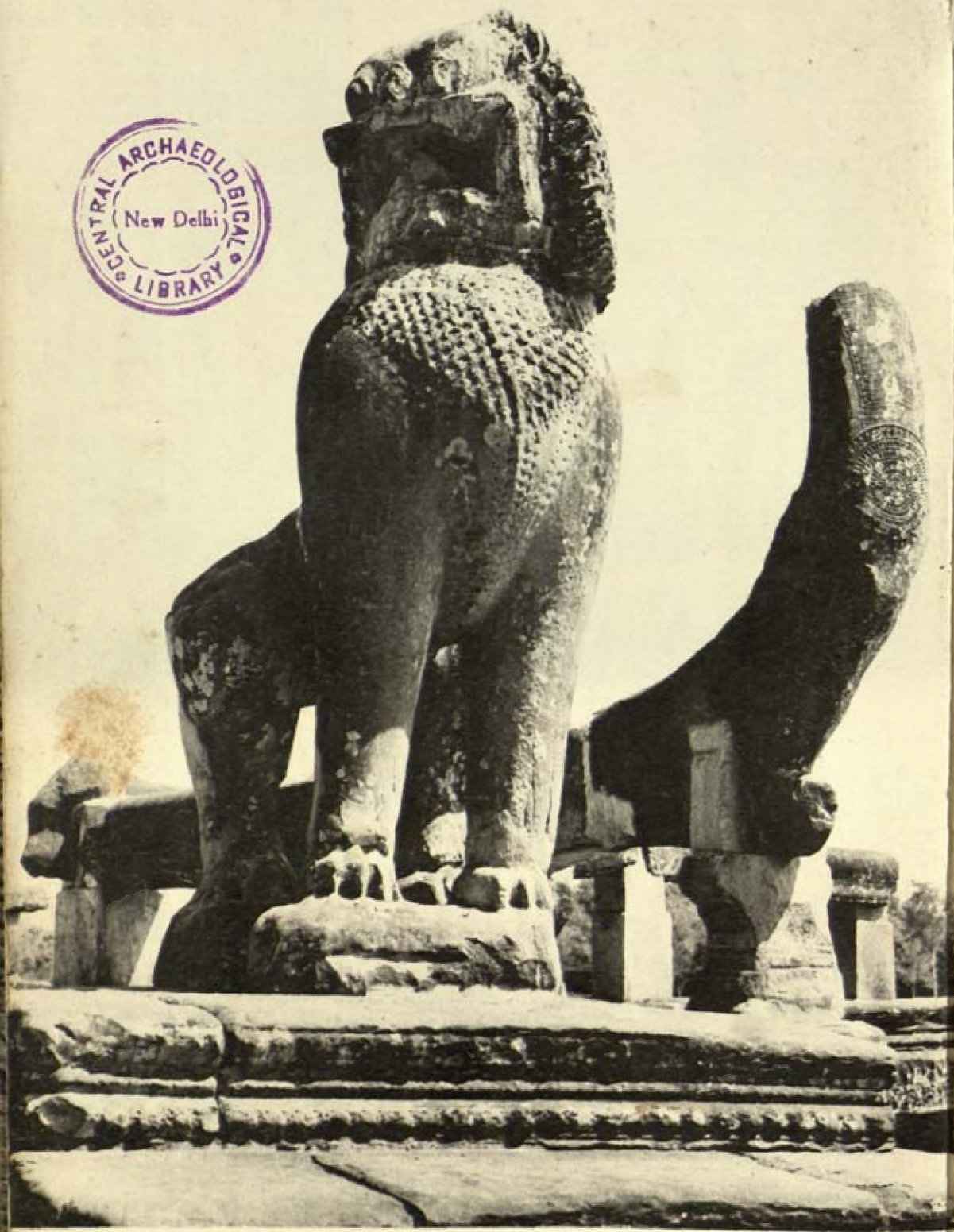














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